

The Tim Ferriss Show Transcripts

Episode 82: Sam Kass

Show notes and links at tim.blog/podcast

Tim Ferriss: Hello, ladies and germs, this is Tim Ferriss, staring out through my window at the eucalyptus trees swaying in the breeze. But that's enough poetry for this episode of *The Tim Ferriss Show*. *The Tim Ferriss Show*, of course, like every episode, is intended to help you deconstruct excellence, world-class performers, to pull out the tricks, routines, habits, books, etc., that you can use and emulate to improve results in your own life.

Guests vary from hedge fund managers, to top-performing angel investors, to people like Arnold Schwarzenegger on the celebrity front, to chess prodigies. In this case, we have not only a chef but a chef plus policymaker plus would-be professional athlete. His name is Sam Kass.

Sam is a fascinating guy. He graduated with a history major at UChicago. Before that, he was on the professional baseball track. Then, he became private chef for the Obamas, and then ended up the Senior Policy Advisor for Nutrition Policy at the White House. He helped to run, as Executive Director, the Let's Move! campaign, which used private-sector partnerships to pursue the goal of reducing childhood obesity to just 5 percent by 2030, and for that, he was named No. 11 on *Fast Company* magazine's 2011 list of The 100 Most Creative People.

It's such a multi-faceted story. Sam is a hilarious storyteller, and there are a lot of really concrete takeaways. The book that he could not recall offhand in this episode is *A History of World Agriculture* by Marcel Mazoyer and Laurence Roudart. So, in addition to *The Art of Fielding*, Ottolenghi's books, and some of the others that he mentioned, there you have it – *A History of World Agriculture*.

So, now, without further ado, please enjoy my conversation, and our conversation, with Sam Kass.

Sam, welcome to the show.

Sam Kass: It's so good to be here, man. I'm excited.

Tim Ferriss: It's an interview that I've really been looking forward to, and I am very, very hopped up on caffeine. This is an Amish morning for me. I'm usually a 10:00 a.m./11:00 a.m. kind of guy because I'm a night owl.

I'm going to jump into some morning questions in a second, but I wanted to first congratulate you on the James Beard Foundation Leadership Awards.

Sam Kass: Thank you. That means a lot. James Beard has been an incredible organization. They are like the Oscars for chefs. They've taken up a lot of the important issues around food, nutrition, health, and sustainability, so they have an award for that. It's a great honor. I'm excited.

Tim Ferriss: So, for those of you who don't know, the Leadership Awards – and this is from their website – “recognize specific outstanding initiatives as well as bodies of work and lifetime achievement,” so that's a hell of a tagline. We're going to get into all of that, but first, I have a very important question: How do you prefer to make eggs in the morning?

Sam Kass: Actually, I've been eating a lot of eggs these days. Eggs are one of the hardest things to cook. Some of the great chefs in the world, their test for a new cook would be how to make an omelet. That would be their one master test.

So, I actually like eggs all ways, but almost always soft, though, like a soft-boiled egg. I'll do eggs over easy or really soft scrambled eggs. I guess the trick for soft scrambled eggs is – after you get your butter knives out – I crack the eggs straight into the pan, let them cook for a second, and then mix them up. Then, before you think they're done, take them out because they'll harden a little bit as they sit on the plate. But I'll eat eggs pretty much any way.

Tim Ferriss: Are you a tea guy, a coffee guy, or none of the above?

Sam Kass: I drink both, so all of the above. I'll do coffee in the morning with a little half-and-half, and either a little coffee in midday or tea, and then I'll definitely have some tea at night, some chamomile tea or mint tea or something. But, yes, I drink them both.

Tim Ferriss: Do you have any particular type of coffee or way of prepping, or is it just, “Treat it as fuel – whatever will get me through the day”?

Sam Kass: I wouldn't say that I'm one of those coffee lunatics who are wild about every specific thing and talk about it like wine, but I appreciate a good cup of coffee, and one of my least favorite things is a terrible cup of coffee. I can't drink it. So, I'm a big Stumptown guy. Blue Bottle does a great cup of coffee. There is some really good coffee out there. I do French press in the morning, really simple, with some half-and-half. It's nothing crazy.

Tim Ferriss: I'm going to ask the morning-routine question a little bit later on, but you mentioned coffee snobs, and this is kind of a good segue because you live in Brooklyn, but you came from a town that is actually really well-known for coffee these days, which is Chicago.

Correct me if I'm wrong. I could get some of my bio incorrect, but you grew up with parents who were both teachers. Is that correct?

Sam Kass: My dad's a teacher, and he was when I was growing up. Well, actually, he worked in the Ford factory when I was very young, and then he changed jobs to become a teacher. My mom has been in education, like science education and stuff, but more for like museums, and now she's at the National Science Foundation. But there are lots of teachers in my family. My aunt and uncle are teachers, my cousins are teachers, and my sister's a teacher, so I come from an educational family.

Tim Ferriss: What was that like, growing up? How did that impact you or affect you?

Sam Kass: It probably was more of how I pushed back against it. That was probably the strongest influence. I wanted to be a professional baseball player from the time I was like 3, all the way through college, to be honest. I went to junior college to try and make it to the major leagues. So, as my parents pleaded with me to dig into the books and hit them harder, all I wanted to do was take batting practice and go after some fly balls.

So, it came back to me when I transferred in college, and then beyond.

Tim Ferriss: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Sam Kass: I have a younger sister who is still in Chicago.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. And you, ultimately, in college, ended up at UChicago. What drew you to baseball? Why did you play baseball?

Sam Kass: I love baseball for a number of reasons. First, it is so hard. If you are successful 30 percent of the time for your whole career, you'll be a hall-of-famer. That means if you fail 7 out of 10 times, you're one of the greatest players in the history of the game. So, that constant challenge and that constant challenge to get better always really drew me.

It's also a team sport, so you have the camaraderie that is really powerful and those bonds with your teammates, but it's also an utterly individual sport. So, unlike soccer or basketball where if you're having a bad game, you kind of blend in, if you make an error in baseball or you strike out with the bases loaded, everybody knows that you messed up. So, you really have to take responsibility, and you're held accountable for your actions.

I think it's those kinds of lessons of discipline, hard work, accountability, and learning how to fail. Even if you failed five times in a row, that sixth time you get a shot at it may be the most important time and can win the game. How do you mentally prepare yourself to walk into that moment clear-headed and not carrying the baggage from those previous failures which could impede your ability to be successful when it mattered?

Those are the kinds of things that I just loved about baseball, and it really served me well in all other aspects of life.

Tim Ferriss: You had a very good batting average. I've read that it was ranked among the best in program history at the University of Chicago. Is that accurate?

Sam Kass: I haven't checked recently. I'm sure some of the younger guys have taken over. When I left, I think I was No. 3, but we were at U of C for the education, not the baseball. We had a very good team. I played two years of junior college baseball, just trying to get drafted, where basically all I did was play ball – six hours a day, seven days a week, literally, and sprint training in the morning. That's all we did.

U of C was a little different. It was two hours a day, five days a week. I'll never forget the first practice, when Coach outlined our schedule and said that on Thursdays, we didn't practice because we had science labs. I almost passed out. I didn't even know what he was talking about. Science labs? Not baseball? It was an adjustment for me, but probably the best decision I've ever made was to go there.

Tim Ferriss: Like you said, if you go to, say, Iowa for wrestling, wrestling is your career in college; academics are secondary. But at UChicago, you had, obviously, a very strenuous academic program. What did you do that other players didn't do, which allowed you to not only make it through UChicago and the academics, but to have that good a batting average?

Sam Kass: That's a good question. I'm not exactly sure I know a definitive answer to that. I had come from such a rigorous baseball background, where a lot of the other guys were playing baseball secondarily. That part came really easily to me. I think the part that was a real adjustment and that I could learn from them was how to really hit the books in a way that I had never had to hit the books before and how to organize all that classwork. The expectation was that you were supposed to read like five books a week. That was absurd to me, going in.

So, I learned from them how to balance that side of it, and from my side, I think the discipline, and how you efficiently use your time, both in the gym and in batting practice, and how you make the most of what you're trying to get out of it were things that I could bring to the guys, and I was able to be successful on both sides.

Tim Ferriss: The major you ended up choosing was history. Was that an immediate choice? Did you know that you wanted to do history? How did you arrive at that?

Sam Kass: I looked at a couple of other majors, but I arrived at history because, at the time, there were a lot of things swirling in politics. There was a lot of work. There was the First Gulf War. There were a lot of things going on that I was paying attention to and for which I didn't really understand what was happening, and I realized that if I wanted to understand the world around me, and politics, and everything that was happening, having a much better grasp on history and where these things had come from was going to help me.

I think that really propelled me to focus in on history, which I love. I'm a history geek.

Tim Ferriss: Do you have any favorite history books or biographies?

Sam Kass: Oh, man, that's so tough. That's so tough. I don't know if I have one. I like some obscure ones. I have to get you the author, but there's *A History of Agriculture* book that completely changed my perspective. It's kind of boring, but if you're a geek and you look

at the impact that simple tools have had on our society, the transformational shifts, we forget how fundamental that stuff is. So, I'll get back to you on that. There are so many great biographies and great history books.

Tim Ferriss: Cool. I'll put the title of the book, and so on, in the show notes. So, we'll come back to that.

This is kind of the missing piece in the Sam Kass puzzle that I haven't immediately been able to figure out. How did you go, then, from majoring in history at UChicago to food? How did you become interested in food?

Sam Kass: I had always loved food. As a kid, I liked to cook, but I had no notion of ever pursuing it professionally in any way. When I was at U of C, my friend was a sous-chef at this restaurant in Chicago. I didn't know him super well, but I said, "One day, I think I'll go to culinary school when I'm old, just so I can learn how to cook for my kids and wife, whenever they decide to show up," and he was like, "Well, don't do that. Just come in and hang out at the restaurant and see what you think."

So, I went in. It was like an Italian-American spot in Chicago, a nice place, nothing too fancy. And I loved it. So, I ended up just showing up, and scrubbing potatoes, and hanging out, and trying to learn some things.

The chef said, "Well, if you're going to keep showing up, I guess I have to pay you." So, he did, but it was pretty much an unmitigated disaster. I knew nothing, but I always work hard, so they threw me on the line to work the pasta station and – oh, my god – the dishes the chef let me send to the table almost always came back because they were just inedible. It was a rough start.

So, I had that one summer, and then I finished U of C. I had one semester left, and I kind of kicked my way into an abroad program. I got waitlisted and made a strong plea with the dean to let me into one of the programs; I didn't care where I went. I ended up going to Vienna. I said to the head of the program, "I worked this one summer in a restaurant. I'm interested in food. Maybe there's a pastry shop or something I can go hang out at once a week or something, totally casual."

So, I landed in Vienna, and she said, "My husband's uncle's friend-from-college's son rides bicycles with the sous-chef of the best restaurant in Vienna." That's literally what it was. She was like, "He can meet you tomorrow, if you're interested." So, I meet

this dude, a crazy guy. He came up to me and said, “Are you the Yankee who wants to cook?” on the street, and I said, “I am.” He said, “All right, come to the restaurant tomorrow.” I did, and it was a Michelin Star best restaurant in Vienna. It was incredible. I knew nothing about food, but they ended up taking me in and training me, sort of old-school, European-style, kick-your-butt until you can’t take any more and you figure it out.

I have lots of stories from that place. But that’s sort of how I really was propelled into it.

Tim Ferriss: I have a few things. I just want to explain for people who are maybe not in the industry that a sous-chef means “under chef,” right? That’s kind of the second-in-command in the kitchen. Is that a fair way to put it?

Sam Kass: Yes.

Tim Ferriss: It’s just like sous-vide is “under pressure,” I guess. So, there are a lot of stories. We talked about one over dinner the other night, and I can’t skip it, so could you tell people about your baptism by fire in that kitchen?

Sam Kass: There are so many stories.

Tim Ferriss: It’s the fever dream.

Sam Kass: So, it was December, and that’s the busiest time of the year, by far, for this restaurant. The guy who did all the fish, meats, and sauces had to have surgery, and so the executive chef had to take over for him.

He was like 40 and was a super-talented guy, but he wasn’t cooking anymore. He was running things, and being out with the guests, and doing his thing. So, he was really unhappy about having to cook the line during the busiest time of the year, so he walked in when we got the news and was like, “All right, Yankee, you’re with me.” So, he had this huge incentive to teach me how to prep everything as fast as possible because he didn’t want to have to do it. So, he taught me how to make all of the sauces, prep all of the meats, and cook everything, and then we would work the service together.

In the middle of the month, on a Friday, the chef came down with a 104 fever and was completely laid out. It just so happened that my best friend, who was a Rhodes Scholar at the time, was coming to

visit me from England, so we were supposed to hang out. I was supposed to have the weekend off, and we were just going to hang.

So, he showed up, and I was like, “Hey, man, you’re coming with me. I’m putting you in a chef coat, like we can’t leave.” They had the breakfast cook, this guy Wolfgang, who was an awesome dude, but he was doing platters of fruit. He was a good cook, but he didn’t cook dinner service and he never had. So, it was the three of us trying to figure out this dinner service, and it was pretty funny.

At the end of the night, the sous-chef said, “All right, Wolfgang, you have to take the day off. It’s the two Yankees on the stove tomorrow night,” and the kitchen went silent. All the cooks couldn’t believe it. So, we figured out the system. My friend’s a smart guy, so we studied the words in German of the different fish and meats and whatever we needed.

The next night, we were packed. So, the sous-chef would call out the order, my friend would take out the fish or the meat, and then I would cook it. As I was cooking, on the other side of me also cooking and facing me was the guy who did all the vegetables and side dishes that would go with my meat or fish.

When I looked up, he would just be standing there with his mouth open, completely in awe of what was going on because that station that we were working was what people would work their whole careers for. It was an incredibly prestigious, well-paid position, and here were these two Americans who knew nothing about cooking working in the Michelin Star restaurant on the hardest station in the kitchen. It was hysterical.

And we made it. We basically got through without any catastrophe, and I’ll never forget that when the last ticket went out, the sous-chef – his name was [inaudible] [00:21:33] – he turned around and said, “Yankees, we won!” and in German, shouted for bottles of champagne and bottle of beer. We had a good old party that night. It was a ton of fun.

Tim Ferriss:

I remember hearing this story and just having my jaw drop open because I’ve had, of course, very limited exposure to food and restaurants, but during the writing of *The 4-Hour Chef*, when we first met up in DC, I remember going into a handful of restaurants.

Obviously, different restaurants have very different environments, but when you look at a line – not at a Michelin Star restaurant but just at any restaurant – during a busy period and 40 menus open at

the same time, it is complete chaos. You have to be Dr. Octopus to work one of the hot lines. So, it's like you guys were kind of yanked out of the audience by the conductor of the orchestra and asked to do violin solos. I can't believe you guys made it through that.

What was your internal self-talk when you got the news or when you walked in for that evening? How did you prep yourself for that? Unlike baseball, if 3 out of every 10 dishes are working in the restaurant, you get punched in the face. So, what was your self-talk to get through that?

Sam Kass:

The key in a restaurant, and the key in any kind of high-pressure situation, I think, is that 75 percent of success is staying calm and not losing your nerve. The rest you figure out, but once you lose your calm, everything else starts falling apart fast. In a restaurant situation, as the tickets start piling up and everybody else is waiting on you, and particularly in this, the timing would have to be perfect because you go up on six dishes, and the guy who's doing all the side stuff has cooked all this, and he has to get to the next round, so your timing has to be right on. If you're too slow, all of his stuff gets overcooked, and he has to cook it again. So, you can really throw things off.

So, I think the key thing was mentally preparing myself like, "When something goes wrong, you just stay calm and stay the course." I think the other thing is one of the first things the sous-chef taught me. He gave me some really fundamental rules which have lasted me throughout everything I do.

The first is: Never serve anything you wouldn't want to eat, like never serve crack. It's Rule No. 1. It's just true. You can have a high standard on everything. Rule No. 2 was: When things get really busy, instead of just plowing ahead, and trying to work as fast as you can, and just going through all the tickets, he always would tell me, "Step back and come up with a plan. Look at what dishes you have, and figure out the most efficient way to cook them." So, if you have five of one thing, don't just cook them one at a time; get them out, prep them together, and do them together.

So, those kinds of fundamental rules I try to hold really close, and you just come up with a good system. I think every great restaurant has an incredibly strong system that, when the pressure gets heated up and everything's moving super fast, you rely on to move you through. I think that was key. We came up with a good system, and out it went. So, I wasn't focusing on too many things at any one

time. I focused on cooking the things that my friend was giving me, and it worked really well.

Tim Ferriss: It was so fascinating for me to visit different kitchens and to look at the layouts and the methods because there are really sort of the internal workings of the executive chef thrown out into the architecture of the room, and the process, and all that. I remember just being so surprised at, for instance, Alinea in Chicago and how quiet it is. There's no yelling. There's no screaming. It's more like an operating table. What is the most unusual restaurant, that puts out very good food, that you've come across in terms of just how it works?

Sam Kass: So, I worked at Avec, which is one of America's great restaurants. It was really a wine bar that ended up putting out such good food that it's won James Beard awards and all other kinds of accolades just because the food ended up just kicking butt. But it was not set up for that at all, so it was a teeny line of three people, one big wood-burning and gas-burning oven, and a little stove. What we were doing out of that was just incredible.

But the kitchen that blows me away the most is the kitchen here in Brooklyn, actually, at Frankies 457. It's so tiny. It's literally two guys on two induction burners in a space that's like 5' by 10'. They cook for this huge restaurant. It's one of my favorite restaurants in America.

Tim Ferriss: What was the name again?

Sam Kass: Frankies 457. It's unbelievably good, and I look at these two guys back there with two induction burners, and I just don't know how they do it. And the menu is huge, and it's delicious.

So, what people can do out of very small spaces is pretty incredible.

Tim Ferriss: For people who don't know what an induction burner is – and correct me if I'm wrong – an induction burner is basically a stove top that you plug in and you can put on a countertop. Maybe it's the size of a large dinner plate; it depends on what kind you get. It uses, as I understand it, magnets to heat metal, so you could actually take the pot off, put your hand right on the burner, and not burn your hand. You have to make sure you don't have rings on.

That actually raises this question of elegance, right? One of the questions I was going to ask you later is: What's the most

interesting meal you could make in a dorm room? Induction burners in a 5' by 10' space, that's basically a dorm room that these guys are cooking in, it sounds like.

If you had to limit your herbs or spices to three choices for the rest of your life, what would your three choices be?

Sam Kass: Herbs or spices? Oh, my god, what a horrible, horrible question. Only three?

Tim Ferriss: Yeah. Or you know what? I'll give you a little bit of wiggle room. Let's say a handful.

Sam Kass: I'd have to have chili peppers of some kind, any kind; there are a lot of kinds. Chili peppers I would have to have. Any herbs or spices... I'd probably have to take basil and tarragon. I'm a huge tarragon guy. Spices? Oh, my god, how do I pick just one? I don't know. Cumin is a really versatile, big spice. I love pink peppercorns, although I don't know if that would make the cut. Yeah, that's a really hard question.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, I know. This is to make the shopping list for myself. Now, tarragon kind of revolutionized eggs for me – tarragon and white truffle sea salt, of all things, which was recommended by a friend of mine. How do you use tarragon?

Sam Kass: Oh, man, you can use tarragon on anything. I love it straight in salads. You could chop it up with some parsley and some basil, and you can put that on fish. I use tarragon on steak. A little tarragon and maybe even a little butter on a steak is delicious. Anything seafood, I find tarragon goes also really well with. So, if you're doing a pasta, you could do a lemon-tarragon, something-seafood pasta. Fill in the blank on the seafood, and you pretty much can't go wrong.

You have to be careful because it's strong, so you can overuse it pretty quickly, but if you use it gently, it's a beautiful flavor.

Tim Ferriss: You mentioned steak. What is your favorite cut of steak, and why?

Sam Kass: My favorite? I guess I'd have to be a rib-eye guy, but I eat a lot of skirt steak and a lot of hanger steak. I love braising, so I eat a lot of different braising cuts – ribs and such. But if I were going to have my last steak, it would be a rib-eye.

Tim Ferriss: When you're cooking rib-eye for yourself, just for Sam and nobody else, how do you cook it?

Sam Kass: If I'm doing it for myself, but really if I'm doing it for anybody, I'd just throw it on the grill, really simple, medium-rare to rare, with olive oil and salt. Sometimes, I use pepper, and sometimes not. I'm not a big pepper guy, so I don't put black pepper on pretty much anything, really, but a steak is kind of the one thing I'd be open to that. And away you go. It's nothing fancy.

Tim Ferriss: And you put the olive oil and salt on beforehand or afterwards?

Sam Kass: Beforehand. And if I'm going to do an herb, like sometimes I'll put tarragon or some rosemary, I always do that afterwards because I find that when you put it before, it just burns and you lose the flavor. But if you hit it afterwards, particularly if you're going to sear it on the grill and then finish it in the oven for a few minutes, which is often the way to do it if you have a thick cut, you put that on so it cooks a little bit to round out the flavor, but it doesn't kill the flavor.

Tim Ferriss: I always sear and then finish in the oven at a low temperature, and just let the butter and whatever herbs I'm going to use soak in from the top down.

So, you mentioned that you're not much of a black pepper guy, but you also mentioned the pink peppercorns, so what would you use pink peppercorns for, which I don't think I've ever used?

Sam Kass: So, you could use them on any meat. They go great on pork, or if you grind them up as a rub on pork, or you could do it on steak as well. You can do a fun salad dressing with them, as part of it, but it becomes part of a flavor. For me, black pepper is used like salt – we use it on everything – but salt becomes part of the flavor. It elevates the flavor, whereas pepper layers on top of the flavor, and it always blankets things for me. I don't know. I'm just not a fan of that ubiquitous pepper flavor on everything.

Tim Ferriss: So, on the flipside, aside from tarragon, if one of your very close friends were to say, "I love Sam, but he really overuses this ingredient," what would that ingredient or condiment or herb or spice be?

Sam Kass: I don't know. It's probably garlic, but we all are guilty of using garlic too much because it's just so damned good. It just makes everything better.

Tim Ferriss: I literally have minced garlic in my tea right now. I'm not kidding, so, yeah, I'm guilty of the same sin.

How did you first meet the Obamas?

Sam Kass: So, we're both from Hyde Park, and Hyde Park is on the south side of Chicago, where the University of Chicago is. When he was a professor, actually, I had known him just from the neighborhood, and the now First Lady, when I was in high school, but then lost touch with them for many years and got reconnected with them when I came back from my time in Vienna and then subsequent travels around the world. I traveled for about four or five years, through Vienna and past it.

So, I got reconnected with them sort of right as the campaign was getting going.

Tim Ferriss: And was that through Avec, or how did you guys end up reconnecting?

Sam Kass: So, when I was in Vienna, I was actually there illegally. I had no worker's permit or anything, and ended up sort of getting run out of town. That's a story for another day. So then, I spent about four more years past that cooking and traveling, and I ended up getting connected to a family that had a place in New Zealand. So, I cooked a couple of seasons down in New Zealand, and they were from Chicago, so after the second season, I came back with them to Chicago to work part-time.

The father of that family knew the First Lady and happened to run into her on a plane. They got to talking, and he was telling the First Lady about me cooking for them, and she was like, "Oh, Sam, I haven't seen him in years." So, we got reconnected.

Back then, there was no staff. It was basically just them and grandma. They had a little bit of help, but not much, so I started helping out the First Lady as she had to get on the campaign trail more and more. The kids were still very young, so I started helping her out with cooking some better food for them.

Tim Ferriss: What were some favorite meals during that intense campaigning period?

Sam Kass: That's all top secret. I can't disclose. No, I'm just kidding. During that time and all the way through, there's never been any interest in

fancy food at all. It's really simple food that everybody's going to like – lots of chicken or lean proteins, lots of fish. We always do whole grains, so if we're doing rice, there's always brown rice and always a good serving of vegetables.

I think the thing that people think about when they think of a private chef is fancy food, but really, they're in their home, so people don't want to feel like they're in a restaurant. The same is true in the White House, so we always kept it really, really simple. We ate like everybody else eats, nothing crazy. We love a good burger, things like that.

Tim Ferriss: If, hypothetically, let's say five years from now, you decide, "You know what? Just for the hell of it, I'm going to have a couple of restaurants in Chicago." You go back at some point, you're the owner, and you decide to hang out at one of the restaurants. Lo and behold, the Obamas come in for dinner, and they say, "Sam, make us whatever you think will bring back the memories." What would you make them?

Sam Kass: What would bring back the memories? What would I make them? That's a great question. The first thing I'd say is that it depends on what the season is because I think one of the keys to great food is cooking with the season.

Tim Ferriss: Summertime.

Sam Kass: Summertime. So summertime, I'd probably start with a really nice tomato salad because one of the best things about being in the White House has been the First Lady's garden. We got to pick awesome produce right out of the garden right before dinner. So, I'd probably start with an awesome tomato salad. I'd maybe do some barbecued chicken with some good spice, maybe some potatoes, and just a bunch of vegetables. So, we would pick zucchini. I'd do zucchini and basil, maybe a little eggplant or some peppers. I don't know. It just depends what's going on. We've grown some great corn, so maybe I'd do some really good corn with that. It would be something like that.

Tim Ferriss: What would the tomato salad look like?

Sam Kass: If you have great tomatoes, you don't want to do much to them, I think. If you don't have great tomatoes, then you have to work with them some, but you probably should just do a different salad then. I like it with a little onion. On this one, I typically like red onion, really thinly sliced. One of my big things is I hate thickly

sliced red onion. It's as thin as you can slice it – the thinner, the better.

But actually, in a tomato salad, a white onion finely cut, too, is good, with some nice olive oil. A white balsamic is really nice on a tomato salad. It has a touch of sweetness. Any number of herbs works. You could do part whole-leaf parsley and some basil, and maybe throw in some green beans or wax beans in there, that are blanched. Something like that sounds pretty good to me.

Tim Ferriss: That sounds great. What other pet peeves do you have, aside from overuse of pepper and thickly sliced onions? I love pet peeves. I have a million of them myself, so what other things make you crazy when it comes to food?

Sam Kass: I think the thing that makes me the most crazy in food is just when people try too hard and they try to be something that they're not. There's nothing I love more than a perfectly fried wing or an awesome burger, but I hate when there's food that looks all fancy but tastes like crap. If you can do food that's beautiful and super well-composed, I appreciate that too; it's not that I don't like that. But if you're just throwing foam everywhere and doing some weird concoctions because that's sort of trendy... I hate the trends in food. I like real, well-executed food, and you can tell it has a lot of love in it and a lot of authenticity in it. That, for me, is most important.

So, I think, generally, that's the thing that determines my experience in eating somebody's food.

Tim Ferriss: That was something that really surprised me when I got to know quite a few chefs in writing *The 4-Hour Chef*, that when they came to visit, say, my house for dinner or someone else's house, the last thing they wanted to have was a five-course meal. The last thing they wanted to have was some type of foam sprayed onto their plate with tweezer cuisine on top of it. They're just like, "No, just give me a really fatty burger or something really simple that I can enjoy consuming."

What made the White House garden unique? I know that a lot of thought went into that. I've never gardened, but I've become very fascinated by it because when I went to this village called Ogimi in Okinawa at one point, which has the longest median lifespan in the world, I noticed that nearly everyone gardened in some capacity. So, what made the White House garden unique?

Sam Kass:

Well, there's a lot that's unique about that garden. One is that it's the first garden since Eleanor Roosevelt's victory garden during World War II, which was a really powerful symbolic garden, but it was actually quite small and really didn't produce food to eat. So, the First Lady's garden is really the first garden since the late 1890's that actually produced food. It was designed to really shine a light on food – where it comes from, how it's grown, and how hard it is to grow good food – to really lift up farmers all over America who are producing the nourishment that we need to survive, and to make it educational.

It's a working life garden that we ate from every day, but also, we had kids come down for tours on a weekly basis. The kids would come and plant with the First Lady, and then harvest and cook with her a couple of times a year. We had a compost, so we were able to talk about the importance of giving back to the soil and building soil for fertility, which is a huge issue across the country.

We also had the first-ever beehive on the White House grounds, which was just awesome, and we got tons of honey, but we could also talk to the kids about pollinators, and why they're so important, and how we have a huge problem with colony collapses. We're losing bees and other pollinators at really alarming rates, which has massive implications for our economy and our ability to produce food.

So, I think you look at the whole picture and what it's accomplished. Since that garden's been planted, gardening across the country has skyrocketed. It's up over 30 percent. So, it's been really exciting, and it was a ton of fun.

Tim Ferriss:

You mentioned a couple of things that I think are really important. The magnitude of the impact of bees is something I never really understood, and I still need to understand more. People talk about the butterfly effect, and I feel like the bee effect, sort of the cascade of different ecosystem changes that bees are involved with, is really astonishing.

The second thing that I would encourage people to look into is what you mentioned, which is the soil depletion. I remember at one point, and maybe one of the listeners can find this, seeing data – I believe it was from China – that looked at the incidence and frequency of cancer diagnosis in different regions in China, and you could pretty much predict how much cancer there would be based on topsoil depletion in different regions because they would end up with trace mineral deficiencies, like selenium, and so on.

I remember reading about this, at one point, that in certain areas, because of monocrops – like the wheat and soy and so on in the US – the topsoil has gone from 10' to 10". What do you think needs to be done or can be done to help reverse that trend?

Sam Kass:

There's a lot that needs to be done, and I'd say it's a topic that doesn't get anywhere near the attention that it deserves. Everything is based on the health of our soil. The reason why we had such a prosperous nation was that we had the best soil in the world, and it helped us produce a surplus of crops, which allowed big parts of our population to go on and build and create and do other things.

The dramatic loss across the nation of our topsoil is something that couldn't be a more important issue, and it couldn't be a harder one to get people excited about because it's like, "Oh, dirt. What are you talking about?"

There are a lot of things that need to be done, and I think they're starting to see some change. I think people are starting to wake up to this. We need to do a much better job of rotating our crops to rebuild fertility right now. We're basically growing just a couple of crops and using synthetic fertilizers to make up for the lack of fertility in the soil. That's a problem. We're having all kinds of problems stemming from that – runoff in our water, massive algae blooms in the Gulf killing sea life. There are a lot of challenges there.

So, I think we need to rotate crops. I think we need to change our practices to really focus on rebuilding that fertility, using different sources of natural fertilizers.

And you're starting to see people taking back some of that land and rebuilding, and hopefully that will continue to grow. I think we're going to continually have to work on sourcing food that's coming from farmers who are doing those kinds of practices that are more sustainable. I think the thing that people don't realize is that if we use those kinds of practices, that is one of the best tools that we have to sequester our carbon.

So, agriculture is not only a challenge when it comes to sustainability and our environmental challenges with the greenhouse gas emissions that it's a significant producer of, but it actually, unlike other aspects of the challenge, can actually be part of the solution. So, there is exciting opportunity there that we don't see in too many other sectors that need to change.

Tim Ferriss: I'm excited about the potential for soil replenishment because I feel like it could be effective in marketing product. Does that make sense? There's an economic self-interest that I think could be harnessed if somebody could create the proper campaign.

What do you think the future is, if any, of, say, organic subsidies for people or large companies who really want to produce organic produce but view it as cost-prohibitive or something along those lines?

Sam Kass: This is obviously a very complicated question and really complicated politics. I think the place – and, again, this is hard to get people super excited about – to really start is in research. So, over the last about 50 years, we poured the vast majority – hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars, billions of dollars – into researching just a couple of crops. Fruits and vegetables at large have not gotten it. Mostly, it's gone to corn and soy – some wheat, but mostly corn and soy. That has allowed corn and soy to be produced much more efficiently than it used to.

So, a lot of the price difference we talk about – like the relative cost of, say, sugar and other things versus a fruit or a vegetable – is because we've figured out how to grow those crops much more efficiently. So, if we invest that same kind of research to try to figure out how to grow fruits and vegetables more efficiently, we're going to make up a lot of the ground.

Now, part of the challenge is that the people who are currently growing, say, the fruits and vegetables – whether they're doing it organically or not organically – they like the fact that they're the only ones growing it, so they've not supported subsidies for other people to grow more fruits and vegetables.

So, there are really tough politics because, in Washington, if the people you're trying to help are against you, it's going to be very hard to move anything through. It's hard to move anything through if they're with you because there are always going to be people on the other side fighting very hard and investing a lot of money in seeing that not happen. So, on this particular one, the politics are really hard to get Congress to shift where we're putting some of these subsidies.

Now, on the organic side, which has a different set of questions, I think the market's going to have to continue to drive the change. You're seeing organic continue to grow at a very rapid rate,

although it's still a very small part of the overall food economy. But I think the more that consumers demand it, the more it's going to get grown, and it's going to become increasingly more affordable for farmers to produce it when we get some more scalar.

Tim Ferriss: It's such a thorny, gnarly topic. Just as a side note for folks who perhaps want to eat organic but have to pick and choose for financial reasons or otherwise, there's a list called the "dirty dozen" – and I think it might be the "clean 15" – which is a list of the 12 produce items that are best avoided and that have the highest concentrations of pesticides.

I think the research is really, as you noted, super important because it's one thing, in the abstract, to say, "Organic is better for reasons A, B, and C, and avoiding synthetic pesticides," but if someone could actually look at, say, the endocrine impact of estrogenic compounds that are found in synthetic fertilizers that therefore affect fertility or whatever, then I think it could get more airtime.

Sam Kass: I will say just one thing on this point, though. I think people should try to eat organic when they can, but I think they need to eat fruits and vegetables first and foremost. So, I think part of the thing to be concerned about is that I would much rather people eat any conventional fruit or vegetable than organic chips or organic cupcakes. I think we're getting better. People are raising more awareness. Our agricultural practices are getting better, largely because this stuff is getting more and more expensive, so farmers are learning how to be more diligent about their applications.

There is obviously a lot farther to go, but there are going to be some things where we're going to need some insecticides and some pesticides, and I think that's okay as long as they're being used responsibly. I think part of the thing we need to avoid is fear-based, "If you eat this, it's going to kill you," because there is just not the evidence there. There are reasons for serious concern, and continued engagement and pushing on some of these topics, but it shouldn't keep anybody from consuming that balanced diet that we know is important.

Tim Ferriss: There was an article that came out recently by Steve Case, called "The Future of Food is Food." What are your thoughts on meal replacements like Soylent and so on?

Sam Kass: I actually tweeted about that article. I couldn't agree with Steve more. Steve basically makes the argument about high-tech, artificially-put-together drinks that are based on some science that

could replace food. I think the vision for the folks at Soylent is that they can create a perfect meal, so instead of eating a bunch of junk, you can just conveniently drink this. I don't hate the vision there, in the sense that they're trying to do something good.

But if the future is a disgusting, tasteless, soulless beverage just to keep us alive, that's not a future I'm much interested in being a part of. I think it lacks authenticity, I think it lacks flavor, I think it lacks happiness and joy, and all of that goes into what good nourishment means to me.

I see a role, maybe with elderly people and others, for improved dietary supplementation, but I don't think that's a solution that I, for one, have any interest in participating in. I think real, good food grown properly, which supports the people growing it, which supports the health of the people who are eating it, which also is damned good is where we should all be driving to.

Tim Ferriss:

I've done an about-face on this stuff because I've always been a supplement addict, and been infatuated with pills and potions and whatnot as supplementation, but they're called supplements for a reason. I'll echo the sentiment of, say, Nassim Taleb of *The Black Swan* and *Antifragile*. He uses a term called "epistemological arrogance," which is overestimating how much you understand anything as a human.

I think it's naïve to think – I've come to this conclusion, anyway – that we would understand every element of what's in an apple, for instance, or what's in a slice of rib-eye. There is so much uncharted territory that it's naïve to think that we could take the four or five things that we've isolated, and put them in a pill, and confer the same nutritional benefit, for instance. That's Point No. 1.

It's a very fascinating subject. I've gone completely in the whole-food direction, just trying to consume a spectrum of colors every day, for instance.

Sam Kass:

I want to add something to that. On the nutritional side, that basic point and understanding of our limitations couldn't be more right. We've tried very hard to reduce our health to one vitamin or fiber or this or that in a very reductionist way, and utterly missed the interplay between all of these different vitamins, nutrients, fiber, protein, etc. And also, by the way, we completely missed how our body processes it.

So, it's turning out that we have 100 trillion bacteria in our gut – 100 trillion – and, really, what we're doing is feeding that bacteria, which then, in turn, feeds us. The evidence is emerging that the microbiome, the gut bacteria, is going to be one of the most important things to focus on in terms of improving our health, and we've lost quite a bit of diversity in our gut. But there are a couple hundred species of bacteria in our gut – a little less – and we are just trying to figure out what does what and how they interact, and everybody is different.

The complexities here are just overwhelming. We know that they need to be fed a high diet of fiber. Lots of fruits and vegetables is basically what they feed, from birth. So, for a long time, there were parts of breast milk that babies couldn't digest, and we didn't think they were important, but it turns out that, actually, all of those elements in breast milk are feeding the emerging biome in the baby's gut, which then deals with the immune system, and inflammation, and all of these vital things, and the digesting of food. So, the complexity is beyond anything that we can comprehend right now.

I think we have continually – over and over – tried to say, “Oh, fat is the problem,” and it turns out, fat's not the problem. “Oh, it's a deficiency in omega-this,” and it turns out that it's good, but it's not the panacea it was made out to be. Every time we do this, we get it wrong, so I agree with you. I think there are some things that have been tested over millennia, which is a balanced, good diet of whole grains, and lots of fruits and vegetables, and lean proteins. And I think where we're safest is when we stay in that kind of space.

Tim Ferriss: I'm glad you mentioned “safest” because it's not just, “Oops, I didn't cover all my bases,” when you take a very reductionist approach. For instance, when the media got its hands on the so-called promises of beta carotene, and people started consuming massive amounts of beta carotene, it can actually cause a lot of problems when you're not consuming it in its natural environment, so to speak.

I'd love to shift gears and ask some rapid-fire questions. They don't have to have rapid answers. When you think of the word “successful,” who is the first person who comes to mind and why?

Sam Kass: Well, two people come to mind: Barack Obama and my father, but for wildly different reasons. I measure based on impact and the amount of impact somebody is trying to have in a positive way on

the world around them – not by money, but what you do with the plate that you've been given. There are a lot of legitimate disagreements in politics, and I'm sure there are legitimate disagreements with some of the things that the President has done.

But I know firsthand, on a daily basis, that here's somebody who is trying to have, and has had, a massive positive impact on the world around him. That's something that I very much look up to and admire, and I, in my much, much, much smaller way, try to figure out how I can have the biggest positive impact on the world around me, I'd say. But there's a lot of ambition that goes with that, and disappointments when you fail.

On the flip side, my father was a 5th grade teacher. He just retired after 25 years. He lives an incredibly humble life, and was a union guy growing up, and was a teacher and a union guy in the school. He's utterly content. He has a good community of friends. He has a roof over his head and meals on his table. In fact, when I first worked at a restaurant in Chicago, he had never spent \$20.00 on a meal for himself, which I only found out when I invited him in for a meal at the end of my summer time there. He's just very content in the simple pleasures and the simple life. That's something that I also try to take into what success looks like, that kind of contentedness and being appreciative of what you have.

Tim Ferriss: Right, it's having the appreciation and not just the drive for achievement.

What is a book that you've gifted most often or gifted very often to other people?

Sam Kass: I've been pushing around *The Art of Fielding* over the last year or two, by Chad Harbach. I love that book. It's a baseball theme, but it's really about life, and all that goes with it, and complexities in relationships. There's something about it. That book just sucked me in, and I love the feeling of being sucked in, which doesn't happen with that intensity too often, so that was a good one.

Tim Ferriss: *The Art of Fielding*. Are there any documentary films or movies that have sucked you in in that way?

Sam Kass: I love documentaries. I'm a big fan. The last one I saw, actually, just came out, which I really loved, called *Just Eat It*, and it's about food waste. We waste 40 percent of the food we produce, which is just insane. There's no other major life system that is so inefficient. It's about this couple who, basically, for – I forget how

long – six months decides to only eat food that has been wasted, that they find thrown away in some way, shape, or form. It's an unbelievable story. It's really well-done. It's only an hour. I think it just aired on MSNBC, actually. They have to give away food, they find so much of it; they can't eat it all. It's very powerful, very well-done. That's the one that's top of mind.

Tim Ferriss: I'll have to check that out. That makes me think about a book I read a long time ago. I think it's called *The Man Who Quit Money*. It delves into the dumpster-diving freegan movement, I guess they call them, instead of vegans. It was really fascinating.

What \$100.00-or-less purchase had the biggest positive impact on your life in the last six months to a year, let's say? It's whatever comes to mind. It doesn't have to be in that timeframe.

Sam Kass: I got a Kindle recently, which I didn't have before, which has been great. I know I'm way behind the curve, and it's not the highest-tech way to read things, but it's been great because I'm all over the place, so that's helped. I also got an ice bucket. It's made the rosé that much colder as summer is starting to hit, and that's been an investment well-worthwhile.

Tim Ferriss: That's a good call, the ice bucket. I love rosé. I grew up on Long Island, and there's a wonderful rosé from Wölffer Estates.

Sam Kass: Yeah, I know that.

Tim Ferriss: It's really good. The winemaker, Roman, is just amazing. It's not too expensive, either.

What does the first 60 minutes of your day look like? What are morning rituals, whether when you were at the White House or now, that have been consistent for you?

Sam Kass: So, I have a pretty consistent basic routine. The one variable is something that I used to do a lot more and I don't do any more. The first thing I love to do, if I'm in a perfect world, is a short stint of meditation for 10 or 15 minutes. It was impossible for me to do that at the White House, for whatever reason. I just think mentally quieting and slowing my mind was just something that it just wouldn't do, as hard as I tried. Exhaustion also played a role.

But I wake up and work out five or six days a week. I do about 30 minutes of cardio, and then do weights of various sorts of sets.

Tim Ferriss: What type of cardio do you do?

Sam Kass: I'll do 10 minutes on the bike, and now I've been doing a 12-minute interval run, and then I do another 10 minutes of 12-incline walking at 3.5 on a treadmill. Sometimes, I do the elliptical in there and then do weights.

In the White House, it was always: Take shower, get ready, and then I'd do oatmeal, a banana, and coffee. Since I've been out of the White House, I've been doing eggs a couple of ways, some whole-wheat toast with maybe some avocado or salmon, and coffee. That's been the routine. And then away I go.

Tim Ferriss: Do you do anything in particular before bed?

Sam Kass: I don't have that same kind of routine at night. Nights there is much more variable. The morning has always been the time that I take for myself and carve out because, after that, it's anybody's guess what's going to happen. But I try to bring down a little bit. But oftentimes, and certainly at the White House, I was working until 1:00, 2:00, 3:00 in the morning pretty consistently, so it was sort of like you worked until you fell off your chair, crawled into bed, and then got up a few hours later and started doing it all over again.

So, I don't have that same kind of night routine.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. When you meditated, what type of meditation did you do? What did that look like?

Sam Kass: The woman who taught me was one of the most amazing people I've ever known. She was an 80-year-old woman who was actually from France, who I met when I was traveling on the border of Malaysia and Thailand on an overnight train. She was 80 years old, and she had spent the last 20-plus years of her life just traveling with a teeny little 8-pound backpack, and that's all she had. She went everywhere, and she was just the most amazing person.

She was not like a formal teacher, so just trying to have good posture and fundamentally relax and focus on my breathing is as sophisticated as I got, and trying to let my mind relax and repeating that, forcing my mind to get back to that state, which has always been such a challenge. It's so hard. That's how I would do it for as long as I could.

When I do it, I feel so much better, and so much more grounded and calm through the day, but it takes a lot of discipline to carve out the time in any given day.

Tim Ferriss: I find, for myself, because I meditate 15 to 20 minutes each morning, two really interesting things. No. 1, it takes about 15 minutes for me just to let the dust or mud settle, so I really only feel like I'm meditating in the calm sense for the last 5 minutes, but I need the 15 minutes just for a warm-up, or a cool-down maybe. And then No. 2, I've noticed that if I just sit with very good posture and lengthen my spine, imagining my head being pulled up on a string, even if I don't get to some sublime state, if I just focus and sit that way for 20 minutes, there's a huge benefit, for me anyway.

Sam Kass: I feel the same way about that.

Tim Ferriss: I would love to ask some questions from people on Facebook and Twitter who are very excited that we were going to be chatting. The first is a tough one, but it's from Andrew Zimmern.

Sam Kass: Oh, I love that man. He's awesome.

Tim Ferriss: Andrew is great. He's also been on the podcast, and he wanted to ask some questions because he hears them very often. He gets asked them very often and is always curious how other people answer them. The first is: If it's illegal to sell cigarettes to minors, or drugs/booze, why do we let fast food or sugar drinks into schools?

Sam Kass: That's a great question. I have a couple points. One, because of the new standards that are in play, there are no more sugary drinks in schools. Those are out. Actually, you need to give the beverage companies credit. They actually voluntarily pulled out most of those beverages starting in around 2007. But the new standards utterly eliminate all sugary drinks.

In high school, you can have a low-calorie Gatorade, and you can have no-calorie drinks, so diet sodas are allowed in high schools, but not in middle schools, and certainly not in lower schools. So, those drinks are out.

On the fast food side, I have always been pretty appalled that some of these – particularly the less healthy companies – have set up shop in high schools. Now, this is not ubiquitous by any stretch of the imagination, but they definitely exist in some number. I

actually need to look and see because their food does not meet the standards, unless they're changing their offerings, so I'm not sure where they are in the evolution of either what they're offering in schools or if some of them have had to pull out. The truth is that I don't know the answer to that, but I'll dig into that and come back to you on it.

But I agree. I think it's really inappropriate to have a fast food, pretty unhealthy restaurant set up in a high school. I've always found that to be very off-putting.

Tim Ferriss: Cool. I would love for people listening who participate on the blog – obviously there will be a post with all the links and resources and so on, including things like organizations like American Farmland Trust that I've done stuff with, if you want to get involved in some of these things – I would love to hear ideas for what types of campaigns or angles could be taken to remedy that. I do pay attention to the comments.

The next question is from CinemaAir. This is on Twitter: Best use of wine that's too old to drink.

Sam Kass: Depending on the kind of wine – and I think there's probably a little magic depending on where you are and how it goes – that's how you make vinegar. Grape juice turns into vinegar. There, depending on how it goes, you could use it in that way. A lot of people use it for cooking, but no real chef would say you should. If it's not good to drink with, it's really not good to cook with.

So, the truth is that there's not much to do with it – I have to be honest – at least not that I know of. Maybe somebody out there has a good thing. Basically, drink it before it goes bad is my best advice to you. If you get one of those simple air pumps with the rubber top that pulls the air out, you add a week or two, depending on the wine, of life to it, and that's what I use. We use that in our house, and it makes a big difference. One of the worst feelings in the world is dumping out half a bottle of wine that you didn't get to finish.

Tim Ferriss: The vacuum is really cheap and really effective. I use the same device.

On that point, Stefan Bendle asks: What should home chefs stop doing? So, wasting wine would be one.

Sam Kass: Wow, what should home chefs stop doing? There are a few things. What should home chefs stop doing? I need to spend more time with home chefs to give you the best answer. I think dragging the knife across the cutting board as a shovel is something that you're never supposed to do. If you need to move the vegetables or scoop them up, use the backside of the knife, but scraping the knife on the cutting board just drives me crazy. It's just really bad for your knife. It dulls it immediately. It's something that I cringe at.

I think home cooks need to work with heat and not be afraid of heat more, particularly when you're searing fish. You need that pan hot.

So, getting your pan super hot, and then putting your fish down, and leaving it, and not touching it, and letting it get that nice good sear, good golden-brown on it before you touch it is key to fish. Most people don't get ever get the pan hot enough, don't take the time to heat it, and then play around with the fish, which ends up really hurting its ultimate feel.

I think basically the one thing that's the big difference between a pro and a home cook is getting real color on things, be it meat or any vegetable that's on the grill or anything you're putting in the pan. Just let it go. When you think it's ready, give it another minute or two and get that really dark, dark color on it. It adds a ton of flavor.

Tim Ferriss: When can you tell that your pan is hot enough for that nice sear on a fish?

Sam Kass: When you put the oil in, you don't want it to immediately start smoking – then, your oil's done. Don't put it in there if it's like smoke, but you should see the oil get those kind of lines in it, that shimmer, and it should just start to give off just a little bit of smoke. That's when you're ready to go.

But it should be hot. When you put it in, it should be like [Sizzling Noise]. It should go crazy. If it's just a little mild bubble, you weren't ready.

Tim Ferriss: What type of oil do you like to use with fish, for instance?

Sam Kass: You can use a lot. You can use olive oil. It has a lower smoke point, but you can get away with it. I like grape seed oil. It's a great oil to cook with. You can do high-heat canola; it's totally

fine. Those are probably the main ones to go with. Peanut oil is awesome, but that's a little more expensive.

Tim Ferriss: I've been playing, myself, a little bit with avocado oil because it has high omega-3 content and a decent smoke point, but it's so rich. Depending on the food, it can either enhance or completely contaminate what you're trying to make.

The next question is from Chaos Anatta: When you fall into a rut in the kitchen, what book, resource, or person do you turn to for inspiration?

Sam Kass: I try to get out and eat, or go to the store, or see and feel and touch and smell. The thing that I try to do when I just sort of feel dead is to use the actual ingredients to inspire what I'm going to do. I really don't look at cookbooks a ton anymore, but the one recently that I have is Yotam Ottolenghi's. His books are awesome.

Tim Ferriss: Oh, wait a second here. I know this name. How do you spell that name?

Sam Kass: O-T-T-O-L-E-N-G-H-I.

He is an incredible chef, he and his partner. They're a Palestinian and Israeli team/couple. *Plenty* is probably their most-famous book, but they have *Jerusalem* and *Plenty More*. Their books are just spectacular, and the recipes are simple but so delicious. I've definitely cooked a few out of them, and they're always awesome.

Tim Ferriss: If someone is new to healthy cooking, where would you suggest they start? What could they start with, anything simple they could use to get the ball rolling?

Sam Kass: Do you mean in terms of a dish or a book?

Tim Ferriss: A dish, stocking the kitchen, un-stocking the kitchen – it's a general question, so I'd say you can interpret it any way you want.

Sam Kass: I think the key is starting simple. I think people, whenever they approach it, they're like, "Okay, I want to make a change," and they think they have to overhaul everything, so then they try to do a dramatic thing, and then, of course, it's not sustainable. You can't keep it up, and then you revert back to who you've been, and then you just completely stop. So, I think little things.

One place to start is vinegar, if you want to start small. Getting really good vinegar makes a salad go from really uninspired to really delicious. So, one place that I'd actually invest a little, if you're going to invest a little resource in, is getting some really nice vinegar to make really beautiful salads. Salads are some kind of green. A good combo is some kind of leaf; some kind of texture, be it cucumber or fennel or various things; acidity, so any kind of citrus fruit is always great, or just a really nice vinegar; some nuts of some kind; and a cheese of some kind, like a Parmesan or a pecorino.

With those basic components, it's hard to really make a terrible salad. Sometimes, cheese can throw you off, so you can play around with that, but if you get good texture, you get good flavor, and you have a nice vinegar, the world is yours. That's a really good place. To just add some salad to your dinner is a great place to start.

But I would try to add a piece of fruit and try to add another thing of vegetables at dinner. Just start there, with those two things. I think the other main thing to start is drinking more water. There's nothing better than water. The more water you drink, the less sugary beverages you're going to drink, which is really key if you're going to try to live a healthier life.

That's a great place to start, and then you build from there.

Tim Ferriss:

The water is key, just to echo that for people who might be following a diet of any type – Slow-Carb or Paleo or whatever – to trying to lose fat. If your liver is burdened by even partial dehydration, it's just not going to do a very good job of helping you to oxidize fat.

I've noticed tremendously, even with getting into, say, ketosis, because I'm experimenting with that, that the more water I drink and the more I walk, the better off I am and the faster I'll drop into, say, ketosis.

The other thing, just on your point with nuts and cheese, is that it seems like with almost any dish, if someone wants to impress a dinner guest, just putting Parmesan and sliced almonds on anything looks really fancy and it tastes amazing.

On that note, this is Will McClellern: There may not be a best meal, but what's the best meal to impress a girl with but is easy to make? A lot of guys have a phobia of cooking in any capacity, so

what would be one meal that might impress a girl but that is easy to make?

Sam Kass: That's funny. Well, I was just talking to one of my best friends – in fact, that guy who was with me in Vienna – and he was telling me about a date he was on just yesterday. He was saying, “Oh, yeah, I cooked that risotto again.” He was like, “Man, you taught me that that one time, and I've rolled with that for the last ten years.”

I think a risotto is a really good, very easy dish to make that you can do a lot of things with that seem very fancy and impressive but isn't that hard. For basic risotto, you start with an onion or a shallot. You cook that down. You cook your rice. You have a stock of some kind, so you can buy a nice chicken stock or seafood stock, depending on what you're going to put in there, and make sure that's hot. Then, you're just adding some stock as you go.

Sorry. You cook the onions, and then you put the rice in and mix that around. Add a little white wine and let that evaporate. And then, you're just adding stock as you go until the rice is done. You want it to be a little al dente. You want it to have a little tooth to it, so you don't want it mushy.

And then, you just finish it with whatever you want. If you're going to have some scallops in there, you could do a whole seafood thing. You can do a lamb risotto. You can do a vegetable risotto. You can do anything you want, and it's hard to mess it up because you finish it with a little butter, some olive oil, and a bunch of Parmesan cheese. So, it's hard to go wrong there. It's one of those dishes where it's hard to make it perfect, but it's –

Tim Ferriss: It's easy to make it good.

Sam Kass: It's easy to make it good.

Tim Ferriss: God, that's so true for so many things in life.

So, I want to get a little granular on this because I'd actually like to try to make it this weekend. So, you take the onions or the shallots. Those are thinly sliced, right?

Sam Kass: You want to dice those up. You want to make them a very small dice, like a mince.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. And then, you throw that in the pan or pot – I guess pot, in this case – with some olive oil. Would you have some type of oil in there to start with?

Sam Kass: Yes. You have some olive oil. You put that in. You cook it a little bit. Then, you put in your rice. Depending on how many people you have, you use a cup to two cups, if you're not doing a ton. A cup of rice will be enough if it's two people. Then, you cook that a little bit, getting it covered and coated. Then, you add a bit of white wine.

Tim Ferriss: Now, is the stock already in there?

Sam Kass: The stock is not in there. The stock should be in a separate pot, and it should be hot. You should bring that to a boil and keep that warm.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. Okay, so onions, you cook that down and let it caramelize a little bit.

Sam Kass: No, actually, you don't want color on it.

Tim Ferriss: You don't want color. Okay. Then, you add the rice. So, you have a cup of rice. How much white wine would you put in there?

Sam Kass: I'm not a great recipe guy. You just want to get a nice couple of splashes in there, maybe like a quarter cup at the most, and then you cook that down. You want to get rid of all the alcohol. So, when you lean over the pot and put your nose over what's evaporating, if it kind of burns the inside of your nose, you know that there's still alcohol burning off. Once that burning sensation goes and it's just like, "[Sniff], that smells good," then you know you're ready to go. It should be dry, basically, before you then start adding your stock.

Tim Ferriss: Got it. And then, once you add the stock, is this on a medium heat, or what's the heat?

Sam Kass: You want it to be a nice simmer, an uncovered simmer, and you only use a wooden spoon because you don't want to damage the rice, and you only want to use Arborio rice. That's really important. It's a nice starchy rice, so you'll get a nice, starchy broth.

So, you just add the stock as you go. So, you cook it. It will start absorbing. You realize, "Okay, I'll need some more." It starts

absorbing. You keep adding. Now, if you run out of stock, you can finish with water, no problem. You want to heat the water up. You don't want to put a cold liquid into your risotto because that stops all the cooking process and can start breaking down the rice if you do that too much.

Tim Ferriss: I like this idea. I'm going to try this this weekend because it seems like you could also, for instance, like with scallops which are so deceptively easy to cook, kind of muck around with the risotto, and if you're kind of flying by the seat of your pants and half screwing it up, since the scallops will only take four minutes, two minutes, to cook, you can do it last minute and just drop them in.

Sam Kass: If you're using the bay scallops, the little guys, when your risotto is basically done, you put them in, just give it a stir, and turn it off. They'll basically cook through just as it settles at the end.

So, you cook it, and it's getting close. So, when it's basically done, then you put in your Parmesan, you put in some butter, you put in a little olive oil, and you give that a good stir. You're going to want to let it just rest for a minute, and it will come together. When you put it on the plate, you want it to just kind of relax onto the plate. You don't want it to hold up in kind of a ball. You don't want it to run either. So, you may need to add a little stock to make it feel like it's got a little sauce, but it's not saucy.

But then, you can literally add whatever you want – any kind of herbs, any flavor profile that you like. If I love basil, asparagus, and zucchini, I can add that at the end, let that basically warm up, and I've got myself a beautiful risotto. If you're doing scallops – I love a lemon-seafood risotto – you can add a bunch of lemon juice, a ton of lemon zest, like lots of lemon zest and maybe a squeeze of a lemon, and, say, shrimp and scallops. Tarragon is a great herb for that one. Killer risotto.

That one will impress any lady, whoever asked that.

Tim Ferriss: I'm going to try that this Saturday. A question from Kerry Caminsky: What dish have you most frequently made for houseguests?

Sam Kass: Wow, what's the dish most frequently made? I don't know the answer to that, to be honest with you. I love the grill. I'm just a grill freak. It's super simple, fewer dishes, and biggest flavor, so when it's warm, I throw everything on the grill. I grill all the vegetables. We grill eggplant. We grill rapini. We grill peppers and

zucchini. It just all goes up there, and it's a really healthy way to cook because there are no heavy fats or anything. And I've been doing pork chops up there, some steak, even pieces of fish, depending on what it is, and shrimp.

So, I don't know. I just try to keep it fun and simple. This actually kind of reminds me – I think the one other difference between home cooks and pros is just acidity level. When you think it's ready, add another lemon. Pros bump up the acidity level. It's like one of the secrets. We add a little more acid, and it makes everything taste better.

Tim Ferriss: It seems like pros use lemon juice as they might use salt all the time. What are some of the mistakes that people make with grilling?

Sam Kass: One, the grill is not hot, so they end up not getting very good color. I think that's the main mistake. Two, I think they also play with food too much. When you throw it on there, let it go and let it get that nice color before you start moving it around.

I think grills are best when you get the sear, but if you're doing a piece of meat or even a piece of fish, letting it finish in the oven, even just for a minute or two, depending on how big your piece of meat is, is the best way to do it because it'll cook more evenly. A lot of times, if you're using a really hot grill, you'll get a lot of well-done, and then a little bit of rare or medium-rare in the middle, but the sides will be super dry and tough. So, if you get a really hot grill and get a great sear, you'll lock the flavor, and then you finish in the oven. That's always the best way to do it.

Tim Ferriss: You do that to avoid the black-and-blue steak.

The next question is from Daniel Lawhawn: What is the best way to systematically develop and refine your palate? I'll modify that and say: What is the one simple way to start systematically developing and refining your palate?

Sam Kass: Wow, that's an interesting question. I've never been asked that. I think, basically, just tasting everything you possibly can, and really tasting it, like thinking about it, breaking down the flavor, just paying attention to it, and smelling things. Smell is a really fundamental part of taste, way more than we realize. So, I would make sure you're really smelling, touching, and tasting as much as you possibly can. Eat at restaurants. Go to farmers markets. Try

things out. The more you taste, the more you'll start understanding the subtleties and complexities.

I don't know of a resource. That's just the way I learned, by cooking and tasting things, and that's the way most chefs learn. I don't know of a resource that's like a guide to palate development. I'm sure there's something out there, but I don't know of it.

Tim Ferriss: This was a question I had to tackle for myself when I was attempting to learn to cook in the beginning. So, I would say to Daniel that a couple of things really helped me. The first was going to the same restaurant, say, five days in a row. Maybe you can't do five days, but go there regularly enough on off-days, like Tuesday to Thursday or Monday to Thursday, to get to know the staff. Always keep the menu with you when you're eating so you can read along as you eat a dish so you know what's in it, like the five, six, or seven ingredients, whatever it might be.

Smell your food before you eat it. It looks kind of weird, but smell food before you eat it. Up until I started using sinus rinses, I had chronic sinusitis, and I had a lot of trouble smelling.

The last thing would be for unfamiliar ingredients that are mixed into a dish, and this is part of the reason that you would go during the week: Ask them to give you a little bit on the side so that you can taste it individually before you eat it in the mix.

There's a fun book called *The Flavor Bible*, also, that is a cool book, and a lot of chefs use that to come up with unusual flavor combinations.

The next question is from Abe Diaz: If you had to pack the essence of life into a burrito, what would that burrito be like?

Sam Kass: The essence of life into a burrito?

Tim Ferriss: Yes.

Sam Kass: Meaning what would the ingredients be, the food ingredients?

Tim Ferriss: Yes.

Sam Kass: Wow. All right, here we go. Okay, I think I'd have some brown rice in there for fortitude and sustenance for your grit and determination. I would have lots of avocado for the richness of life, beauty, color, flavor, and excitement.

[01:32:04] I would have – what would be my protein? I would definitely have beans. I think beans are like the seed. They're growth, and they harness promise for me, hope, opportunity, and optimism. I'd have maybe a little skirt steak for strength, but not a lot, and I'd have a habanero salsa for the spice, the excitement, the vigorous part of what makes life so amazing.

[01:32:49] And then, maybe I'd let the chef throw in one other mystery ingredient to stimulate curiosity, which I think is the most important or underappreciated quality of people who live great, successful, awesome lives, which is just being curious about the world around them. So, I'd let the chef throw a mystery ingredient in there. How's that?

Tim Ferriss: I love it! It looks like my cheat day on Saturday is going to be risotto and burritos, among other things.

There are just two more questions. This is really fun, and people can certainly let us know if they want more Sam. I'm sure a lot of people will. There are two more questions for you. The first is: If you could give yourself advice when you were just graduating from UChicago, what advice would that be?

Sam Kass: That's a great question. Well, if I would have given myself advice when I graduated from when I went in, I would have said, "Study a little harder. Work a little harder." But when I left, I think the advice that I live by, which kind of holds, is basically, "Get out there in the world, be open to it, and explore it. Don't worry about having a clear plan" – because I didn't know enough to have a clear plan – "and follow things that I really care about and go all-in when I find something that interests me."

Passion is an overstated word. I think passion develops. I was really into food and interested in it, and I threw myself into food, and although I was passionate about it, it wasn't a life passion until I combined food and nourishment with health, sustainability, politics, policy, and what we're doing to really help make sure that all people can live healthy, productive, awesome lives through the food that they're eating.

That is what became that passion. I think a lot of people are like, "Find your passion." I think passion comes from a combination of being open and curious, and of really going all-in when you find something that you're interested in.

And I think always just trying to figure out how to do the right thing and trying to remember why you're doing what you're doing are kind of the lessons that I've tried to live by. They've served well. Getting out in the world gives you a perspective on wherever you are that I've found to be transformative and just a foundation of who I am. So, it's been good.

Tim Ferriss:

I really want to underscore something you said that I think is really important, and that is just related to finding your passion. A lot of people ask me, "How can I find my passion?" and I think that in their mind, they see this singular thing that is this lightning bolt that knocks them off their feet. In my case, just like you, it was an unexpected combination of things that came together by trying a lot of things, and in my case, I didn't have a five- or ten-year plan. It was, "I will do the best I can at this next gig, whatever that is, and look for doors that open."

So, I don't want people to feel like – and I've seen people reflect this – a failure because they haven't had a single activity hit them like a Cupid's arrow or whatever.

If you could make one ask of the people listening to this, what would that ask be?

Sam Kass:

Great question. What would be my one ask? I think my one ask would just be to be engaged. I think, right now, we're suffering from lack of engagement around some of the issues that really matter. There are a lot of solutions, and there are a lot of different ways to think about it, particularly in food. I think there's nothing more important than making sure our kids are getting food. We have so many hungry kids in the country. We're wasting so much food. We're not getting enough nourishing food. In the face of climate change, it's going to be even harder to grow healthy food and produce it at an affordable price for people.

So, the challenges are higher. Engaging and caring and trying to improve the food system through the choices that we're making every day is a start, and I think for people who really get into it, it's starting to translate into politics and actually caring about these issues in terms of who's representing us in Washington.

Politicians follow the people, and businesses follow the people. They try to shape decisions, and they market, etc., but in the end, they're following, so we need to lead. We're leading every single day in ways that sometimes we're aware of and sometimes we're not. So, I think that kind of awareness and engagement can have a

profound impact on what companies are producing and what policies are being made.

That's my big ask, at least in my world. But the truth is that that same principle applies to just about any issue, and I think the more that we're engaged, the more our democracy works.

Tim Ferriss: Agreed. Give a damn, people. Don't be apathetic. Find something to get excited about and care about.

Sam, where can people find you on the Internet? Where can people find you on Twitter? I guess you're @ChefSamKass?

Sam Kass: Yes, @ChefSamKass. My Instagram is SamKassDC. Facebook, to be honest, I set that up so long ago that I don't even what my name is. I have to look that up. I have to get on that, Tim. You're the master of this.

Tim Ferriss: I'm fumbling my way through all of the Interwebs one day at a time. Do you have a website where people can also check you out?

Sam Kass: No, not yet. That is in the works.

Tim Ferriss: It's in process. I will share that with people when it is ready for its big debut.

Sam, this is great. I really enjoy hanging out. This was a lot of fun. For people listening, you can check out the links to your resources, books mentioned, etc., in the show notes. Those show notes and the show notes for every other podcast are at FourHourWorkWeek.com/Podcast.

Sam, thank you so much for the time.

Sam Kass: Tim, it's been awesome, man. You're the best, and you're helping people live better lives, and it was an honor to be here with you.

Tim Ferriss: Thanks, buddy. I'll talk to you soon.

Sam Kass: All right, take care. Bye.