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Santa Barbara

Chef Travis Watson On Speaking Up In The Kitchen, Or Anywhere Else

From racism to the election to Black Lives Matter, letting wounds heal while holding on to passion.



By Travis Watson as told to Danielle Bauter

With more than 34 years in the restaurant industry, executive chef Travis Watson currently leads the culinary team at Santa Barbara's [Hotel Californian](#) and the property's two restaurants, [Goat Tree](#) and [Blackbird](#).

These are some odd times. When they first shut down Santa Barbara, when people couldn't go out, it dawned on us pretty quickly that a lot of people who were used to dining out didn't have that opportunity anymore. Some of them didn't necessarily have the skill set to create great meals at home. So we created a weekly cooking segment on Instagram called "[Tuesdays with Travis](#)." I thought it would be cool to go over some basic stuff like how to use your pantry, how to utilize the stuff you have already. I did the first two or three and thought they would die out. I

was clearly wrong. People seem to be enjoying them, and I enjoy doing them. And it's humbling. But I'm glad people are into it.

There's actually a curfew right now in Santa Barbara, and there's no indoor dining at the moment, so it's kind of gone back and forth. Obviously that affects what we do and how we do it. One of the things this pandemic has taught us is how to pivot, and how to try to make the best of the situation we're in.

We're still a luxury property, so there are certain expectations that go with that. But at the same time, we want to make sure we are keeping everybody as safe as possible while maintaining the mandates set upon us. Although this has been a new and certainly challenging time, it has not affected my love or desire to continue doing what we do, at the highest level we do it.

The people who come out of the pandemic on top will be those who have done the best job of pivoting to what guests want, and the opportunities that remain in our business. It's been a pretty big change, but we're learning how to do business a different way. There have been some challenges, but we're flexing, we're bending at the waist a little bit, so hopefully we come out of this on top.

I'm extremely opinionated, and there are certain things that I take more of an active role in than others. There are some things that I feel super-passionate about, and to that end I have no affiliation—I'm not a Republican, I'm not a Democrat, it just kind of depends on the topic. I'd love to see our president act more presidential. I think one of the things we miss is the dignity of that position. He has enacted some things that I agree with, he has enacted things that I don't agree with. I would say my biggest problem with this current administration is the antics and the way he goes about things. I wish my president wasn't on Twitter as much, I wish he wouldn't get into individual little conflicts with people. I don't think that's necessarily what the leader of the free world should be doing.

But at the same time, I think I'd be remiss if I didn't say that he has done some good. He's given some tax breaks to the middle and lower class that I think have helped. No president is all good, no president is all bad.

I wasn't surprised by the results of the election. Donald Trump has a passionate following. I think a lot of people voted for Joe Biden, but they weren't really voting for Biden—they were voting against Trump. And Biden happened to be the person who was running against him. The truth is there are more similarities than there are differences, but we really seem to focus on the differences.

I'm kind of torn on Black Lives Matter, as a movement. As a thought process, it's impossible not to agree. I want everybody to have value. I want my life to be valued. But I want all lives to be valued. I don't think any life is more important than another. So as a movement, as an organization, I'm not sure of their motives. I don't know that as an organization that they have been extremely clear, or had the right direction. I think there's some subsets that are doing things that are counter-productive. But as a philosophy, I agree with it. As a movement, it's harder to get on board.

In order for there to be a movement, people who aren't directly affected need to see how it affects other people. If only immigrants spoke about immigration, there would never be any immigration reform.

I'm really happy that we could have peaceful protests. I think that awareness is super necessary. And with peaceful protests, you have people from both sides, or multiple sides, come together and have dialogue. I think most people are on the same side of not wanting to see people being abused based on any color, creed, religion, race, sexuality, any of those things. But I also think this summer only scratched the surface on all that. It is a step in the right direction though. Every marathon is started with one step.

I've been fortunate in my career in that I don't know if there's ever been a time that my job has been affected by race. Overtly, that is. Some things have happened in my past that made me ask questions. But you never know how somebody else is being treated. Where I currently work, I haven't faced an iota of that. The executive team I'm part of is extremely diverse in gender and nationality and race and religion. I don't know that there's ever been a thought process by which they've purposely included diversity—I think they just have a philosophy that they're going to try to hire the best people they can hire, and it ends up working out that way.

There's a huge difference between racism and discrimination. Discrimination is an act. If I discriminate against you, I'm refusing you opportunity, refusing you something based on a protected class. And so you can legislate discrimination. With racism, how somebody feels—you can't legislate that. To fix racism, it would have to be bred out of people. That's a generational thing. When my parents were young, their experience was far different from my experience. I certainly know that it's getting considerably better. But if you think about it, Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement—they were asking for some things then that we're still asking for now.

If we're talking about any topic, if we take race and gender and sexuality—if we take those out of the conversation, and just talk about people doing stuff, I think that will go a long way into lessening the value that we place on the color of somebody's skin or their sexual orientation or their gender, or gender role.

If you think of racism as a kind of wound, the longer you allow that wound to heal, the better it is. But since we keep making it the forefront, that wound never heals. Because it's always, always, being reopened. I think we focus a lot on racism, and I'm not sure that that's necessary. During the normal course of my day, I don't hear anything about race. As soon as I turn on the TV, I hear all about race.

I think every vote counts. A few elections ago I was living in Arizona, and the president was decided before the Arizona votes had been tallied. The entire state was saying that this was the perfect example of why your vote didn't matter. And my philosophy then is my philosophy now—everybody says that, until you're the swing state that makes all the difference.

So therein lies the very reason why you want to make sure that your voice is heard. I would hate to think that someone asked my opinion of something that I felt strongly about, and because I didn't think that they cared to hear my opinion, I said nothing. Indecision is always the worst decision. Every single time that you have something to say, or you have an opinion on something, speak up. Because no one else will speak for you but you.