



All the Best Podcast

Episode 84. Cheeseburger Diplomacy

84. Featuring Matthew Wendel, General Manager of The Blair House

Matthew: Dear Jim and Bob, as I headed back to the office after our lunch today, I had a serious thought. I wanted to share it with you. All three of us have had power lunches with famous people. As John Connelly once put it, I have dined with kings and potentates, but the lunch we had today was simply a lunch between dear friends. We didn't have an agenda, and none of us were trying to get our photo taken by that intrusive, persistent camera lady who has become a minor pain in my behind. All we had was the joy of real friendship and what a treasure and joy it really is. I'm a very lucky guy, and I know it. And I want to be sure you two know that I feel that way and that I am grateful to you both always will be. We have all sat at head tables, but our little table today trumps any head table in the world. When I say my prayers tonight, I will give thanks for the friendships we share and honor. George H.W. Bush.

Sam: This is All the Best. The official podcast of the George and Barbara Bush Foundation. I'm your host, Sam Leblond, one of their many grandchildren. Here we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family, and the foundation. This is "All the Best". On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush Foundation, this is "All the Best". Matt Wendel describes himself as a man whose story is rooted in humble beginnings, hard work,

perseverance, and a desire to fulfill his call to duty. From working as an investigator with the Texas Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners and the Texas Attorney General's Office, he made the leap to the White House and the U.S. Department of State. Matthew has entertained and cooked for the first family during the George W. Bush Administration, for World Leaders at Camp David, and the Bush family's Prairie Chapel Ranch near Crawford, Texas, and on staff for the U.S. ambassador to the Czech Republic. He loves to prepare food people like to eat, and all his life he has enjoyed serving his home-style Texas recipes to his friends and family. We're so glad to have Matt Wendel with us today on All the Best. Matt, Welcome to the show.

Matthew: Thank you very much. I'm happy to be here.

Sam: Well, it's great to see you, and we are thrilled to have you on the show. You have an extraordinary career journey that started in Danbury, Texas, I believe, washing dishes, All the way to preparing meals for my Uncle George in the White House and at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. Can you talk about that amazing journey and what inspired you to begin your culinary career in the first place?

Matthew: Well, I grew up in a small town. Danbury is very small. At the time it was about twelve hundred people, and it's mainly a farming community. We had no fast food, anything like that. I have eight brothers and sisters, so a large family—nine children—and my mother was a very good cook. She made it one of her jobs to teach all of her children how to cook. She said, "If you learn how to cook, you'll never be without a job and you'll never go hungry." So I said, "alright," you know, I was kind of like the family eater, the big eater of the family, I just stuck with her from very small child. She'd put us on the counter and have us stir cake batter or mix cookies or whatever. We all have our job to do. I knew I could get a job at the local restaurant, at least washing dishes, at the time because I was 14. I didn't realize too much later, but that was the time in the kitchen that I had my mother to myself because all of her attention was focused on me and the cooking, of course. It was just us two in the kitchen a lot of times and that's, you know, really what inspired me and watch her make these things like cinnamon rolls and breads and all that. You know, I had a professional career out of college, but I always fell back on my cooking skills, and I even worked for catering companies and restaurants to pay for college and would cook for friends and their dinner parties. So I knew that it was kind of my passion, but I didn't realize it till later after working professionally for many years and deciding that there was something else missing in my life, more creative. So I fell back on cooking again. I met the

then-governor for his inauguration and happened to work as a cater waiter at the governor's mansion. And the rest is history, I guess.

Sam: With George W. in the governor's mansion, you were just part of the catering crew, and you kind of, you became friends over the years of working together. How did that relationship kind of start?

Matthew: I had quit my job, became a cater waiter around town to support myself. I was sent over there, and we just kind of hit it off in the very beginning. I don't know what it was, but you know how sometimes he just takes a shine to certain people. He would strike up a conversation, and Mrs. Bush would also strike up conversations. I would end up being there all the time when they entertained, and they would continue to call me myself instead of the catering company to have me come over and help them out. And I started doing some prep with the chefs and started doing cooking when the chefs wanted to be off. Mrs. Bush might want a special meal for your grandfather—when he would come it would be chicken fried steak—so she always wanted to be able to serve him that, and I grew up making chicken fried steak the unhealthy way. And that's kind of how it developed.

Sam: Well, as you said, the rest is history and throughout your career. Working with George W. at the White House, Camp David, his ranch, probably other places as well along the way, you prepared meals for many world leaders, including Vladimir Putin, Tony Blair, Angela Merkel, to name a few. I think there's plenty more on your resume and now even more now that you were at the Blair House. But my uncle George used to talk about something called "cheeseburger diplomacy," right? And bringing everyone together over a meal. Can you touch on how you're uniquely American meals played in these historical meetings? And did you have to change your approach in any way, or did you feel more pressure when these important meetings were on your calendar?

Matthew: That term came about after the president, George W. Bush, had lunch with the Prime Minister of Japan. A newspaper back in Japan reported the story about their lunch and that the White House served an American cheeseburger and how the two men bonded over cheeseburger. And they call the article "Cheeseburger Diplomacy." And I don't know whose idea it was to start serving cheeseburgers—probably Mrs. Bush, she loves them—but we started serving them at the ranch specifically for world leader lunches. I think it kind of set the tone at the ranch for the type of lunch that it was. It kind of brought everything down to a common level. All these people from different countries, different traditions were

eating with their feet under the same table, sharing that meal, and it was always potato salad and stuff like that was on the table, family-style so they could help themselves. I think it was much more inviting and relaxed, so the leaders felt relaxed. They didn't feel all this pressure that you would have at an official state dinner or something

Sam: That seemed kind of the style of George W, right? It brings people to Camp David, and I think probably your cooking style fit that pretty nicely.

Matthew: Yeah, that's exactly right. Because when I was coming to Washington, I said, "What do you want me to do? Do you want me to cook differently?" He said, "No, we like what you're cooking. Don't stop, you know, just keep that going." For those meals, we might have had Vladimir Putin or whomever, but the only people I was worried about were the two people that were the host. And if they were happy, that's a successful meal.

Sam: I have to ask because I heard a story about Chancellor Merkel asking you for some cooking tips and I saw a picture of you in front of the grill with her. She was peering over your shoulder. What did you show her? I think she picked up some tips to take home with her.

Matthew: I was at the pit with ranch manager Robert and we were getting the pit ready for beef tenderloin for dinner that night. Pecan smoked beef tenderloin. Chancellor Merkel and her husband and Mrs. Bush and President George W. Bush were out on a stroll, and I didn't expect them at all, or I would have dressed better at the pit. But they came up and they introduced me and they said, "Oh, Matthew's here, cooking our dinner tonight" and told him what we were having. And she came over and she says, "I love to barbecue myself. I love to grill out, What are you doing? How are you doing this?" And we showed her that on one side of the grill, we had a fire pit with pecan wood really hot, and on the other side of the pit, the smoke would go through. So I would sear over the hot fire, then place the meat on the smoke side and let just the smoke go through the pit and give that good pecan-smoked flavor, which is what we got from the pecan trees in Texas off the ranch.

Sam: Oh wow, so you brought the pecan from his ranch in Crawford?

Matthew: Yeah, that's where the wood came from, Crawford. And that made it a little extra special for the guests.

Sam: I wonder if she changed her grilling style after that?

Matthew: I don't know. When I saw her at Blair House, when she came to your grandfather's funeral to visit the family, I greeted her on the steps and she said, "Oh, the cooker." And then she went into the meeting with the president, she said, "You brought your cooker with you."

Sam: Well, it's actually we're visiting him. Yeah. What a memory she had there.

Matthew: She's very cool.

Sam: Well, Matt, your food was obviously a hit with our family. I can't think of a time, me at least in Camp David, going in and having your food and maybe too much of it and obviously a chocolate chip cookie at the end, which I know is a staple for George W. Thankfully, you decided to share your recipes with the world in your cookbook "Recipes from the President's Ranch: Food People Like to Eat." Can you talk about what inspired you to create this cookbook? And I heard there was some inspiration for the title from maybe Laura's mother, Jenna Welch along the way.

Matthew: That's right. Well, when we first found out we were going to Washington and the President and Mrs. Bush asked me to come with them to cook for them, Mrs. Bush said, "You need to do a cookbook, so just kind of keep a record of what you're doing, your recipes, and then at the end we'll come up with a cookbook." So she really inspired me to do that, and along the way, I would make notes and tweak recipes. And I had very little time between cooking the food, shopping for the food, and serving the food and cleaning up. So Mrs. Welch, Mrs. Bush's mother, always used to stop me and say, "You know, you just make food people like to eat." And that was the most amazing compliment coming from her. So I knew that I had to add that into the title of the book, and I think Mrs. Bush was very touched that I did because she didn't know until I showed it to her. And she says, "Oh, you kept my mother in the book." So I said, "Of course I did. She made the best comment ever."

Sam: Well, that's true, it's true. We all definitely wanted to eat it. Matt, I think I know the answer to this question because our family has a bad sweet tooth, but what was George W's favorite meal over the years?

Matthew: Well, I get asked that question a lot, and I would always jokingly, half-jokingly, say dessert was his favorite.

Sam: That's where I was going. I was going to say we all have the same sweet tooth, unfortunately, and that came from forty-one.

Matthew: Yeah, I would tell people he would eat his meals so fast so he could get to dessert because he would always ask me before a meal, "Hey, what's for dessert tonight?" You know, never like, "What's for dinner?" He's like, "What's for dessert?" Always. His go-to for lunch was a peanut butter and honey sandwich. Most people can't believe that such a simple meal, but he loved them. I mean, he said, I'll just have a peanut butter and honey. He could have one every day. He also loved quesadillas that we serve pretty often with homemade corn tortillas. And he loved to eat the fish out of the lake he caught, to fry up the fish.

Sam: Now, did you have a favorite meal to prepare or you were just whatever they wanted, that's what you were making? Or did you have something where you're like, "Now we're talking."

Matthew: Well, the favorite meal for me is the fried chicken because I'm so tied to it emotionally, because my family, we had it every Sunday, and I lived across the street from the church we went to, and coming out of church, you could smell that fried chicken cooking at our house and everybody would comment, "Oh, I wish we were going to the Wendels' for lunch." And that is one thing also that I would make sure and fry enough up because Mrs. Bush always wanted to take some on the plane home the next day and have it for their lunch. So that was a huge compliment for me.

Sam: And that wonderful fried chicken graces the cover of the cookbook.

Matthew: I believe you had some at Blair House.

Sam: We certainly did. Speaking of Blair House, you're now on your second tour of duty in the protocol office at the State Department as the general manager of the Blair House, which is kind of the guesthouse to the White House, is that a good way to put it? You're now in charge of hosting world leaders that visit the president. Can you talk a little bit about the history of the Blair House, and did working with George W. prior help prepare you for that role a little bit?

Matthew: Well, the Blair House became the president's guesthouse in 1942. Initially, it was just the two townhouses, The Blair House and the Lee House, which the Blair is built for their daughter, who married a cousin of Robert E. Lee. During the Nixon administration, two more townhouses were added to make it a total of four. About a hundred and twenty rooms. Thirty-five bathrooms. It's a lot of bathroom cleaning.

Sam: Toiletries.

Matthew: The legend is that the Roosevelts got it because Churchill would always stay at the White House during the war, and Churchill was known for carousing around at night in his nightshirt drunk, trying to wake up the president, and Mrs. Roosevelt said, "You got to find him someplace else to stay because he can't stay here any longer." So they had him over at Blair House, and that's supposedly the legend of that, how it got started. I get to host many world leaders. We say this is our way of diplomacy for the United States, feeding and housing the leader and his party and showing the great service of the U.S. to other countries.

Sam: Have you been as busy in the last year and a half or so with the travel restrictions and everything, what's going on in the Blair House these days?

Matthew: Well, we haven't been that busy because of all the COVID, but we were planning on being busy this fall. We'll see what happens with the pandemic if it calms down. I would like to be busy. I like to entertain those guests and do my best to make them feel at home.

Sam: I'm sure the president is also eager to have visitors and world leaders and all that good stuff getting started because I know that Zoom fatigue is a real thing for all of us, so face-to-face is how you really get things done. Well, Matt, you were so kind to host our family at the Blair House during my grandfather's funeral week in 2018. And to us, you know, whether it be the fried chicken or the hospitality, we felt like we were back home again. And all the credit goes to you and your staff.

Matthew: Thank you.

Sam: We felt so lucky that you knew us so well over the years that it would seemed like a reunion of sorts, so we were happy for that. But I want to ask you, what do you remember from that week, and do you have any stories about being around

George and Barbara Bush? I know you've spent so much time with them. They've enjoyed your food and your company and everything over the years.

Matthew: Although it was a sad occasion, it was such an honor to be back with your family. Probably the last time everyone would be together was like a Camp David and you were much younger, all of you were much younger.

Sam: That's right, that's right.

Matthew: I felt a sense of pride to be able to be there and see all of you grown up, have your own families, and it was like a surrogate uncle, you know, and I know how much y'all enjoy the food, so that was a great sense of pride for me as well. Your grandmother was very funny all the time when they would come to Camp David or the ranch. Every time we had them there, it was very exciting for Mrs. Bush, Love them to death, and she would make sure that everything was just so and we had your grandfather's favorite drinks and he liked it a little sherry and had his favorite foods and they could just come and relax and enjoy themselves and just be. That's what that place was.

Sam: I can't thank you enough for that week because, you know, we had so much activity and people in town and to walk to the Blair House and see a friendly face there who welcomed us in was such a great part of the week and I really can't thank you enough for that.

Matthew: My pleasure.

Sam: It was an amazing experience that you kind of curate there at the Blair House.

Matthew: It helped me come full circle with the family.

Sam: Just so you know, nothing's changed with George W. I was in Maine last week and he goes, "What's for dessert?" And it was like, "It's lunch," and he goes, "Oh yeah, lunch and dinner." But I think he had a two-day streak going with no sweets, which is a pretty good feat for him. Well, Matt, it was an incredibly memorable weekend for our family, and I just want to thank you again for that.

Matthew: You're very welcome.

Sam: I'd like to end with this question, and man, it was great catching up with you and hearing all the amazing stories. And I love everything that's going on at the Blair House. Hopefully it gets busy for you, I know you're probably chomping at the bit to host again. Do you have a favorite story from your time or two stories or one with George, one with Laura over the years because I know you worked so closely with them for so long?

Matthew: I worked for them, I think it was 15 years total, which is pretty incredible. I think there's a couple of stories. It was late at night after a reception at the governor's mansion. I was outside cleaning up on the back porch and he usually came out there and smoked a cigar and I was the help, so I didn't really engage like a person would sitting out there with him visiting. But he was always interested in what I was doing. And so he's asked me how things are going and what I was doing. And he said, "You know, if I were to run for president, would you consider coming with us and taking care of us?" I said, "Absolutely, I would," you know? And then we didn't talk about it ever again until a year later when he announced he was going to run for president. And then he came to me again. He said, "Are you still up for it? Will you still come with us? It means a lot of hard work and little money, but you'll have the adventure of a lifetime." I said, "Absolutely, I will." And then he won and so I had to scramble and get an apartment and all that stuff. But I have so much respect for both of them, but that he would come to me and ask me that, like, that's what he has assistants for, you know, that do that type of stuff. But that's the kind of people that your family is. And another one was the Obama Inauguration Day when we were leaving Washington. It was a long day. I think, you know, we're there at the hangar at JBA and we all boarded the plane and we were happy and sad and all that stuff and then stopped in Midland and led a bunch of people off. They had another big rally, still exhausting. Fly to Waco, they had another big rally. And it was dark by this time. Get on the helicopter, fly out to the ranch. They're already guests there when President and Mrs. Bush stepped off the helicopter. They just, big sigh of "Oh," like the weight had been lifted, and it was such a nice feeling. And then we went into the house. The president asked me about everybody's luggage. I said, "Well, sir, there's no carpet," is what we call the military, the army, who brings the luggage and drives people around. I said, "There's no more carpet, there's no more valets, no more assistants like that. It's just you and me." He says, "Alright. Let's go out and unload it." It was so great.

Sam: I know my grandparents had the similar transition back to civilian life, which is just, especially with George W, and you have been there in the White House for eight years, I can only imagine George W. hauling in suitcases right to the ranch.

Matthew: Yeah, and the next morning they woke up, came to breakfast and everybody was just so relaxed and like, "What are we gonna do today?"

Sam: Well, Matt, it's amazing talking to you. Thank you for sharing your stories. Thanks for being with us today on All the Best. You're very welcome. Thank you. I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding you to listen, share, and subscribe to All the Best on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate "All the Best".