



Episode 21:



Debora Britz

Food & Dining Editor, Arizona Republic & AZCentral.com

Dana Dobson: Hello everyone! This is Dana Dobson, and I am so excited that you're here today to listen to Episode 21 of the Media Pro Spotlight podcast. This podcast is for business owners and marketing professionals who want to know how the traditional media works so they can get more publicity by working more effectively and professionally with journalists. It's for you if you want to learn how to get the word out to audiences who are beyond the scope of your limited social media base, attract more followers, and get more exposure for yourself or your business.

This week's guest is Debora Britz, who's been the Food & Dining editor at The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com since 2012. She also has overseen movie, home and health coverage for digital and print platforms and has worked as a Metro and Features editor since joining The Republic in 1999.

Debora is originally from Brazil. She has a master's degree in journalism from the University of Southern California, which brought her to the United States. She and her husband live in Phoenix, and her son is a freshman at the University of Arizona.

Before we get started today, I want you to know that you can download a complete transcript of our conversation today, plus show notes and links, on my website, danadobson.com. Click on podcast, then episode number 21.

And also, I've been told by a number of my listeners who tell me they enjoy this podcast and that it's really interesting and helpful, and I'm so happy about that. The Media Pro Podcast is an excellent FREE resource with tons of value, so I want to ask all the lurkers out there who are listening to and enjoying the Media Pro spotlight but who haven't yet engaged--- would you do me the huge favor of leaving me a review on iTunes. The more people who say they like it, the better the chance that other people will listen and benefit the way you do. Thank you so much for taking a few seconds to do that, and of course, thank you for listening.

So now, it's my privilege and honor to introduce Debora Britz, who maybe has one of the most delicious jobs in journalism.

Hi Debora! Welcome to the show!

Debora Britz: Hi! Thank you so much for inviting me. Happy to be here to talk about food and dining.

Dana: Oh, I'm hungry already. I do want to talk about the competition you just had, but first off I usually like to get started asking you to tell me a little bit about who you are and what you do.

Debora: Okay, well, I'm the Food and Dining Editor for The Arizona Republic and AZCentral.com, which is part of the USA Today Network. So that's basically what I do. I am in charge of coverage, planning, editing, and we produce stories for all of our platforms, print, mobile, video, and so forth.

Dana: I just want to tell our listeners really quick that The Arizona Republic is the highest-circulation daily in Phoenix.

Debora: It is, in Arizona.

Dana: In Arizona.

Debora: Yes.

Dana: How did you get started in journalism, and especially, how did you wind up covering such wonderful and fun topics, food, dining, movies. I mean, it sounds like a dream opportunity.

Debora: You know, it's been a dream, actually. I started in journalism back in my home country in Brazil, in Rio de Janeiro where I grew up, and I always knew what I wanted to do. I'm one of those lucky people. I knew I wanted to study journalism. I grew up with stacks of newspapers and news magazines at home. My dad was very much into politics and world news, and he impress on us the importance of knowing not just what's going in your neck of the woods but all over the world, and I had an opportunity. After I got my undergraduate degree in Communications and Journalism, I applied for the graduate school at the University of Southern California, and so I got my Master's in Print Journalism. At the time, there was a program called Print Journalism (laughs).

After that, I worked at newspapers in Southern California, and I also worked at the Tribune here in Arizona. In 1999, I came back as an editor at The Arizona Republic and I worked in national with news and features, and about four-and-a-half years ago The Republic decided to make a bigger commitment to food and dining, being one of our passion topics here, and our top editor invited me to be the editor. I loved the idea. I wanted to go back to features. I love features, and I had been in news, but one of the most important skills for this job, at least when you're starting, is not your knowledge of food, because the people who work for you, your dining critic, your dining reporter, you would assume they know enough of food and dining.

The most important quality, at least at first, is planning and organization, because 80% of what you're doing is planning and making sure your stories are filed on deadline, that your long-term planning is solid and executed in a timely fashion. You know, I remember one of my colleagues asked me, "Well, what are your qualifications to be a Food and Dining Editor?" and I said, "Well, I am not the Food and Dining Editor because I know so much about food, but it's because I am a good planner, and I have a lot of management experience with reporters from veterans to the more entry level, and that's important, as well." So just to give you an idea that it's not necessarily the knowledge about food and dining, wine, and beer, but more about, you know, the core qualities of journalism.

Dana: And knowing what a good story is. You don't hear that all the time about, I think a good journalist can probably write about anything if you put them to the task.

Debora: Absolutely, absolutely, and that's why I think it's so important to be very well-rounded as a journalist, you know. Do the cop beat, the courts beat, cover everything in between, schools, city government, and then you get to features, and then with art, be really good about what your beat is, you know, whether it's classic music or movies or kids and family or home and garden. Just be the best expert you can be at what you do, and that takes a lot of research, not just while you're at work but it's 24/7 nowadays, as you know.

Dana: What does a typical day look like for you? You talk about planning. I assume you're very organized and you know perhaps weeks in advance what you're going to be covering. So what do you do when you walk in the door?

Debora: Clearing emails, basically, is one of the most time-consuming things nowadays. We are being bombarded by pitches from all over the world, and that takes a long time just to figure what's important and what's not. So I think that's something I probably have in common with every worker, everyone. But then, you're meeting with reporters, you're finding out what's going on, if we have any breaking news in the dining world or any big trends going on. I look at how my team's stories are doing online, and we're looking at metrics, you know. Are they getting enough page views? That's something new in the last few years that we didn't used to worry about. Yeah, absolutely.

We're competing even with our own fellow reporters and editors within The Republic, amazing as it sounds, owing to the fact we want the food and dining stories to be most read stories online and you're competing with hard news and election stories and all of that. So it's very competitive, even starting internally.

Then I know what my deadlines are and I know what I have to edit for the next day for the dining section or the next day or two, and then I look at the projects and the things that I have to start editing or assigning and/or checking up on. Our reporters, they are all expected to do not just the, what we call quick hits, the things that break every day, but also long-term projects. So we have to juggle that, and like I said, it's a juggling act, because there's so much going on every day. But that's important because that's how you develop your reporters and you go in-depth and look at trends and what makes our dining scene unique, and all of that. So basically, I must call daily meetings, as well (laughs).

Dana: Yeah, all that stuff.

Debora: Yeah, but it's ironic that, even though I'm editing food-related stories, restaurant-related stories all day long, most days I eat at my desk, so that's kind of sad (laughs).

Dana: So how many emails would you say you got on a daily basis?

Debora: Hundreds.

Dana: Oy!

Debora: Yes, yes.

Dana: What do you look for? Is there something in particular you look for in the subject line as you're going through your emails?

Debora: Absolutely. As far as the local dining scene, we're looking for restaurant openings, restaurant closings, not so much specialty dinners and things like that, but things of broader appeal to our readers. So I'm looking for that. I look at newsletters that I subscribe at, everyday I look at what's new with Nation's Restaurant News. They have an excellent newsletter for fast casual dining, all kinds of grocery stores. Yeah, I highly recommend everybody who is interested in food and dining and the business of it, that's a very good newsletter. I also subscribe to the Nieman Lab newsletter, which is more of an industry newsletter, and it's excellent as far as trends in podcasts and videos and which newspaper is merging with what news blog, you know, what newspaper, and it's just very interesting as well. Readers, I love to hear from them, as well, if they like our coverage, if they have any questions concerning anything. It's very important for me to be listening to my readers as well. So basically, that's what I'm looking for.

Dana: Okay, very good. I mean, that's good advice for not just people who write about the industry to stay on top of the trends but also anybody who's interested in sending you a pitch so that they can be relevant and help you out when you're putting stories together. So I will put the names of those magazines in the show notes so that other folks can go and look those up and stay trendy.

Debora: Yes, yes, yes. I highly recommend them.

Dana: Wonderful. Well I saw a story that you were very involved with recently, and it was the fourth annual Top Home Chef competition, and I put a link to that in the show notes so that people can see it and watch it and things. But would you talk a little bit about how that works? Like, I'd love to know what was required of the contestants to get selected for the competition in the first place, and I wondered if you could give us kind of a behind-the-scenes look at how this kind of a show is put together.

Debora: Oh, sure. Well this year we took it to a new level and the stakes were higher than ever, because we also have an annual event that is in its second year, it's the AZCentral.com Food and Wine Experience, and this year we decided to

dare to connect the competition with the food festival, and what we wanted to offer the winner is the opportunity to do a live cooking demo at the festival. Plus they also got a gift card from AJ's, and the winner will go on a restaurant review with our dining critic, Dominic Armato, so that's very exciting for them. That's very appealing to contestants, you know, to be able to interact with the food-and-dining team and then join Dominic Armato when he's reviewing a restaurant, and like I said, this year you have a special gift card as well and the cooking demo.

But the process is fairly simple. What we're looking for, as the name of the competition implies, is the top home chef. So they apply online. There is a form, very simple to fill out, and we just ask them to submit what would be their menu, and it's a three-course menu, appetizer, entrée, and dessert. We ask them to provide the photo of one of the dishes so we have a feel for a kind of presentation, how they would make the dish, because they will be judged on taste, presentation, and creativity. Then we give them a deadline to apply. We ask them for their entertaining and cooking philosophy as well, just so we can get a feel for what kind of home chef the person is. You know, some people are more casual, others are more formal, some take themselves more seriously, others more lightly.

Once we select the three winners, we cover the expenses, and this year AJ's also offered each contestant a \$300 gift card just to cover the expenses. So that was very nice as well. They obviously don't have buy all of the groceries at AJ's and they are unlikely to find everything they need there, because some of the dishes are ethnic and things like that, but definitely we don't want them to be paying anything out-of-pocket. So then, once we select the three winners and notify them, and we go eat at their homes. So they are cooking for six people, so it's usually the cook with a spouse, a girlfriend, or a partner, and then the four members of the food-and-dining team.

So this year we had three meals, three dinners back-to-back, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. We were really stuffed by Friday (laughs). But they were all amazing, and they were all very different as well. When we're looking for the menu, the contestant, the three finalists we're going to select, it's very important for us to see a mix in the menus. We don't want to eat three pasta dishes, you know, or three steaks. So we look for that, and we had a wonderful time, as usual.

So this year we had three meals, three dinners back-to-back, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. We were really stuffed by Friday (laughs). But they were all amazing, and they were all very different as well. When we're looking for the menu, the contestant, the three finalists we're going to select, it's very important for us to see a mix in the menus. We don't want to eat three pasta dishes, you know, or three steaks. So we look for that, and we had a wonderful time, as usual.

But for the first time ever, we deadlocked, and we could not decide on the winner. There were four judges, and the four of us liked two of the three finalists, so we decided for the first time ever to have a live tie-breaker, a cook-off in the style of Iron Chef. They brought their food to our newsroom. They cooked it, of course, but they assembled it there, and then we tried it. We made a video of it, and when your listeners go online they can see it. Also, we invited a very well-respected local chef and restaurant owner, Josh Hebert of Posh, and so we would have five judges. But ironically, we all picked the same person. So it was unanimous, yes.

It just ended a few days ago, and the winner, Jordan Urnovitz, he will be doing a cooking demo at our Food and Wine Experience this weekend.

Dana: Oh, fun!

Debora: On November 4th to 6th, yes.

Dana: And where in Scottsdale will that be?

Debora: That's going to be at Salt River Fields at Talking Stick, which is on the reservation but it is the Scottsdale area. Tickets are still available. It's an annual event. We started last year. We partner with Art/Entertainment, and this is a joint effort between Art/Entertainment, which plans food festivals all over the world, and our Marketing Department, Advertising, Editorial, Digital, everybody comes together. We plan this for a whole year, and we invite the best chefs of Arizona to offer samples, and wineries and breweries as well. It's just a beautiful event. I can't wait.

Dana: Sounds marvelous.

Debora: Thank you.

Dana: So what advice would have for chefs or restaurants or people who do PR for chefs and restaurants and others who want to be covered by a food journalist. What way do you suggest they present themselves to you?

Debora: That's a really good question. What makes us unique is that we cater to the local audience, so we're not a national magazine like Food and Wine or Cooking Light where you have a national audience and you're trying to appeal to anyone who likes food. This is the valley of the sun, we're trying to work with local chefs, so it's very important first for PR agencies to understand that. So we often get pitches from PR agencies for interviews with the top chefs and celebrity chefs and personalities from all over the country, but they don't live here, so there's no interest on our parts to spend our resources on an interview with somebody who doesn't have a restaurant here, who doesn't have any ties to the valley. Why be

promoting a cookbook but there's no connection, you know? It's not southwestern food.

So I have to say no a lot, but we do want to work with local chefs. We are very lucky that our local PR community is very professional and they know me, they know our team, we meet in-person sometimes, pass around some ideas. But also there is a level of trust that is very important. So if a PR agency is offering an exclusive to us, and there is an arrangement that we will be able to break that story at 10am Monday, but Sunday the competitor has the story online, so it's not an exclusive, you know? So I understand how PR agencies, they have to work with all of the media companies here, and we don't want to play favoritism, but if you're promising us an exclusive interview or a scoop, you have to honor that. Otherwise, the trust is broken. So that's very important, and once you break that trust, it's very hard to trust the PR person again.

But that's basically it, just think about how their diners would be interested in your local news or your local chef, your local restaurant. What is it that you're doing that is different from other restaurants or other chefs, and be very accurate as well. I mean, it one of my pet peeves, and when we get a press release full of errors, that's always a problem.

Dana: Yeah, one typo will do it.

Debora: It will, and you know, people make mistakes. I mean, we're human, so I make mistakes, everybody does. But you know, if you're consistently sending out press releases and information that is erroneous, it presents a problem, and it goes back to the trust level, you know. Can you trust that PR agency to get you the facts correctly.

Dana: Right, yeah, credibility and trust. Those are very important.

Debora: Very, very big, and it's two ways. Like you were saying, and we, the reason we want to make sure our stories are accurate, it's because our credibility is at stake as well. We hold ourselves accountable, and so we have to hold everybody else accountable as well. There are so many people who are working for themselves and for others who don't have an editor, so there's no level of accountability now, and the diner, the customer, the reader, or the listener, those are the ones who are paying the price because they're getting inaccurate information.

Dana: Yeah, I wonder how that's going to shake in the years to come, because, you know, when you're in journalism school, they just hammer it into your head all the time about your sacred trust and you're accountable to the public, and you had to be objective, and you had to have three sources, and they had fact checkers

checking every little thing. But nowadays they don't have, out in the internet world, they don't have those checks and balances as they used to.

Debora: No, they don't, and that's something that, even in the mainstream media, is something that we're struggling with because we need to be the first ones to double-check our stories from the get-go, you know? There is not an unlimited number of resources and copy editors available any more to make sure a reporter's copy is completely accurate. So it all starts with the reporter, really, making that second or third phone call to make sure information is correct, addresses, phone numbers, the basics. Sometimes we're just talking about a phone number that is wrong, and as a result the restaurant is not getting the reservations and some homeowner is getting phone calls from somebody trying to make a restaurant reservation.

Dana: Oh, ouch. Are you responsible for your own images as well, or do you have a dedicated photographer? How does that work? Because I know illustration is so important nowadays, especially video for the website.

Debora: We have a fabulous staff of photographer, award-winning photographers, and we're very lucky to have them. They are all very professional. Some of them have more expertise in shooting food than others, but they are all learning and they're also all doing video nowadays, which is very cool. But we do accept and request what we call hand-out photos, so it's varied, because obviously again, for the number of photographers, they cannot be going out and shooting everything at the same time. So we do work with the PR agencies, and it's crucial for us to get our photos of decent quality, photo credit for the caption. We are also doing a lot of lists, you know, best places for burritos. We would like to have a photo of each burrito, so we work with the restaurants directly, we ask them to send us the photos, so it's big. The photo business is huge.

Dana: Yeah, a big job.

Debora: Yeah, big job, yes.

Dana: Do you write reviews?

Debora: No, I don't. I edit them, but our dining critic, Dominic Armato, is the one who writes reviews. He's been with us a little bit over a year now. His predecessor was Howard Seftel, who was the long-time dining critic at The Arizona Republic. One of the big differences between Howard and Dominic is that Howard was anonymous and Dominic is not. In fact, it's the opposite, Dominic is very active on social media, he interacts with readers on a daily basis, and we felt it was important in this day and age to transition from an anonymous critic to a non-anonymous critic who would have the ability to respond and interact with readers.

Dana: I remember there was a food reviewer for The Republic years ago who used to go in in disguise, did Jackie-O sunglasses and a wig disguise sometimes. So much fun.

Debora: Yes, and it was a lot of fun when Howard Seftel retired. We actually through a toast for him, and we invited the top chefs he had covered all throughout his career, and they all spoke about him. It was funny and sentimental at the same time, but it was so amazing for Howard to be able to shake hands with all of the chefs that he respected so much, and the chefs were so honored to be able to talk to Howard in person as well and thank him for promoting the dining scene and for giving them honest criticism, feedback. So we just felt that in this day and age where, you know, everybody's a dining critic why we could be at a disadvantage if we kept our dining critic distant from our audiences. So now he hosts dinners at restaurants, he hosts events, and those events are very important for us to build our audiences.

Dana: Sounds so nice, sounds so much fun.

Debora: Yes, it is. It's a full job, because he is not just writing the reviews but he, you know, it takes time to interact with the public, to meet with them and to be at events. It's just one person, but it's definitely very worth it.

Dana: Right. You mentioned earlier about the importance of having relationships with professionals that you trust, and I wondered, what is the best way to establish a good relationship with Debora. Do I call you, do I email you, do I invite you to lunch, do I just send good-quality work all the time? How does somebody get into your heart?

Debora: It's actually all of the above, and it's not going to happen overnight. Again, it's the two-way street. You know, if I need something from a PR agency, and we all need each other, that relationship develops over time, and that's okay. Nothing wrong with that. But know it's important, if you're making a pitch to me and if you want to develop a professional relationship with me, you also need to know my product.

So don't waste your time, don't waste my time pitching me things that are not going to be of interested to our readers, because we're not, and again we're appealing to people who live in the valley. We are also appealing to a younger audience these days as well. So families, millennials of course. So all of the above, email, call, let's have coffee, good press releases, good information. It all works, it just takes time sometimes to build that trust, that relationship, but I've had a lot of success with the folks here and the PR agencies here, and they've been wonderful to work with, most of them, overwhelmingly I must say. Some of more professional

than others, but when you get a really good, committed PR person, that's priceless, you know, you want to work with this person forever. So it really is on the PR person to develop his or her own credibility, reputation, and just be committed.

Dana: Right. So where can somebody go to look at your work? Do you have a page up at Arizona Central?

Debora: Yes. You have AZCentral.com, it's our main website. If you want to just go directly to Food and Dining, then it's dining.AZCentral.com.

Dana: Okay, and are you on social media?

Debora: I am. I am on Twitter, on Facebook. I love Twitter, I'm @DeboraBritz, one word all together, my first and my last name. I'm on Lithium. Yes, I am. I'm hoping to get on Snapchat, so I'm working on that.

Dana: I'm trying to figure it out. I still can't figure it out (laughs).

Debora: (laughs) I know.

Dana: Well thank you so much for your time today. It's really great information, and I wish I was in Phoenix right now because that food festival sounds like a dream.

Debora: Ah, well, you know what? The good news is that there will be another one next year, for sure, and you're going to be the first person to find out the dates, because I'm going to give you right now, it's going to be the very first weekend in November. So let me get the date for you right now. It will be November 3rd through 5th 2017. We just settled on the date, our working group. Again, this year it's November 4th to 6th. Next year it will be the first weekend in November, that's November 3rd through 5th.

Dana: Okay, so I will put the link to Arizona Central Food and Wine dot com, up in the show notes.

Debora: Yes, and the link for AZCentral Food and Wine Experience is just AZCentralFoodAndWine.com.

Dana: Okay, writing that down. One last question.

Debora: Yes.

Dana: How do you say "thank you" in Portuguese?

Debora: Oh. Obrigada.

Dana: Obrigada!

Debora: It's been a pleasure.