

**Yes, and Cafe**  
**Episode 3**  
**Guests: Annah Awartani and Lilee Rose**

Nadja Cech: Welcome to the *Yes, and Cafe*, a podcast where we explore, learn, and create with ordinary people who do extraordinary things.

Omar Ali: 'Yes, and' is the powerful, intentional, and creative practice of building with other people. The name comes from improvisational theater. So, what is it? One, paying attention. Two, affirming. And three, building on what others give you. That's it! Yes, and.

Nadja: I'm Nadja.

Omar: And I'm Omar. And we're broadcasting from the University of North Carolina Greensboro.

Nadja: We have a wonderful teacher here joining us in the studio today, Annah Awartani. Annah is from Greensboro as of 1989. She came here, originally from Palestine, and she had Zaytoon Restaurant, which was originally at a location in downtown Greensboro and is now at the Greensboro Farmers Market, so many of you who go to the Greensboro Farmers Curb Market may recognize Annah from her wonderful cooking. She's also a community organizer and health coach, is interested in food as medicine. So we're here to talk to her today about all of that. Welcome, Annah.

Annah: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Nadja: We're so glad to have you. So, Annah, I have to start with a story about you if that's okay. So I've known for some time because I would see her at the Greensboro Farmers Market when my children were small, and my son, when he was very little--maybe like two or three years old--we would always come to Annah's booth, and he loved the cookies that she made, and so she would make a special cookie for him every Saturday morning, and she would save it until he came, and it was a long, thin cookie stuffed maybe with dates, and like, long, spiky, and it would be his special cookie. And she said she made it with love and she thought about him while she made it. And one of the things I've heard Annah say many times is that she puts love in her food. So, I have to ask you, Annah, how do you put love in your food?

Annah: Well, love comes in so many ways, and the way I put love in my food, the quantity, the ingredients, the time you put, you know, the energy you're spreading. And the time you spend making this food. So this is great energy to reflect into this food, and people many times, they tell me, "We feel it."

Nadja: I know, I can feel it, yes!

Annah: It's just like, you know, it's love. You know, I choose the ingredients, I put the time, you know, all of these kinds of things, and to me, it matters.

Nadja: I think you can taste it. Anyone who's tried Annah's food.

Omar: That's amazing. I always wonder, like, you know, the relationship, the activity of serving food, and just the way in which, like a person comes with you with an open heart, that also impacts, it's also the person who's cooking it, but it's also the servers as well. And when you were running a restaurant, it sounds like--I didn't have the pleasure of going there--but it sounds like it was a very loving space.

Nadja: Yes.

Annah: Very special place for the community and for myself. And you're right, to serve the food, it matters. You know, and it can reflect in so many ways, and people sense it. Like, an offer right now, because the grill is still attached to the--I want the community to be part of this and I think food is spiritual. I mean, we have to sell food on two occasions, and they are special occasions, or many occasions in fact. So I'm looking at, you know, actually establishing another program called the Turquoise Table, where we're missing, actually, community when we're together, you know, around the table, and food, and I want our love to sail people forward because, to me, it's very important that it's spiritual.

Nadja: Do you also feel that when you're serving people food that it's a way to connect with them? Like, it's suddenly--it's establish a bond between you and the people eating your food, and that's a way of, like, getting to know people?

Annah: Absolutely. This is one of the facts, you know, I get to know people through this, and you know, it's developed in so many good, beautiful relations, and because of, you know, good food and the love you're spreading into this food, and you feel the connection with people. And your food goes to basically whoever in their house, and it's the energy. And I believe in that.

Omar: I was thinking about-- it's both the serving and making of food, but it's also the people who are receiving it, and they seem to have to have a little bit of an open heart, right? So it takes two to create that. Or do you think that, in some ways, you could overcome people who are a little bit more closed, just by the power of the food that you serve and the way in which it's served?

Annah: Well, that's for sure, people, they have to be aware about that food and they will come forward, and it's mutual relation. You know, I look for organic food because I believe in it. I look for certified, you know, or for co-op community thing, because I believe in it. So it's definitely, it's, you know, it's [a] kind of tight relation, you know, we look for each other, and we connect the love pouring of that food; I'm spreading it and they're receiving it.

Omar: That's wonderful.

Nadja: I like how you have both the community you're creating through the food and the community you're supporting by what food you're choosing to serve. Because you're supporting cooperative farming, organic farming practices, things like that.

Annah: Absolutely, and I've been doing it more than twenty-five years. You know, I came from sustainable community, small village in Palestine. You know, my studies started here, because I was looking for good food and I cried so many times when I came here.

Omar: Yeah.

Annah: I did, I cried.

Nadja: Because you couldn't find good food?

Annah: I couldn't find nothing to, you know, taste good for me.

Omar: Yeah.

Annah: I was looking and touring, and then I found the Farmers Market. 'Cause it just kinda, "Oh, okay," kind of clicked! But I really couldn't find good food that was compatible to my taste, in a way. And then I start developing this thing and creating things and, you know, educating people about a lot of things. You know, when we started the Farmers Market it was in 2000. You know, people, they were not aware of the Farmers Market, in a way. But now it's kinda developed and we tried and we did so many education things. For my part, you know, I through Zaytoon, and through classes and stuff like this.

Omar: One of my mom's best friends, Bri [SP?], has, you know, sells her brie cheese at the Farmer's Market, and I was just thinking about how those spaces allow for people who are creative and wanna maybe make a little business, it affords them a space to kind of do that. And food is so fundamental; I mean, everybody has to eat. But I think that one of the things that I've noticed is that in this country people tend to be a little speedy around food. And I was wondering, like if you could share maybe a little bit about what town did you come from in Palestine?

Annah: Well, I came from a little village called [? - 6:40], it's a suburb of Tulkarem. Tulkarem, which is the name of long fields of citrus and oranges and, so my last name, actually, before I get married, is Lemon, because my ancestor has orchards of citrus and oranges and lemons, and all of these things, so we've known that people come from families like Carpenter or Lemon, or whatever, so my last name is Lemon, so I came from that village. And then I left when I was very young, I left, like, when I was sixteen years old to finish my undergraduate from Jordan University, and then I taught overseas and then I came here, so yeah. I came from small village. But, you know, I grew up in a very sustainable community and that's where my roots started, actually, because I was looking for that sustainable life.

Omar: What does that mean, sustainable?

Annah: Well, sustainable meaning that you're not really depending on other sources. Sustain yourself, agriculturally, I'm talking about food and other things. So it's within the area, you know, the farmers, they produce everything seasonally of course, and the butchers, you know, they do whatever they need to do in the village, and that's what you call sustainable. We're sustaining ourself with not importing, we're not doing any other things to support ourself, you know, when it

comes to food as medicine, of course, you're not doing the other things. But I'm talking about food.

Omar. Mmhmm. Got you.

Nadja: So Annah, you make this comment about food as medicine, and I know that's part of your health coaching. I wonder if you could say a little bit more about that?

Annah: Well, as I mentioned in the beginning, you know, food as medicine, and I believe in the spirituality of food. Because how this affects your body, and it's now it's well known, we're discovering that food impact our health more than anything. Because, you know, people who have an allergy for many, many, many years and they didn't know what was going on, you know, they find out when we do, for example, minimizing things and do things and they start noticing, "Wow, I'm allergic to that kind of food."

Omar: Yeah. Or they feel better because they're not--

Annah: Or they feel better. Or they kind of get nourished, you know, eliminating things, so food as medicine is the goal and the target for a lot of health practitioners these days, because it's really very important in so many ways. Nutrition, and quality, and everything comes to food and how it's impacting our bodies.

Nadja: So Annah, what is your favorite thing to cook? I know you cook many different things; can you describe for us a little bit of some of the things you make?

Annah: Specific dish? From my roots?

Nadja: Sure! Well, whatever. Take it in any direction you like.

Annah: Well, you know, from my roots I like, really, dish called, I don't know how to say it [in English]; it's yogurt, it's *ruz wa lahme ma' laban*, it's like, you know, in Palestine they call *ruz wa lahme ma' laban*, you know, Syrians they call it *shakriya*, in [other areas], you know, the same kind of dish. But what is it, it comes from a yogurt made, homemade yogurt, either from the sustainable village, where the farmer make it from the area, or you know, you make it yourself. And you cook it with real, sustainable lamb, from the area, good quality. And when we talking about good quality meat or good quality food, that's what has the taste, and the quality, and the smell, the aroma of the cooking. You know, all of this matters, and that's when you say, "Mmm, this is good food."

Nadja: [Laughing]

Omar: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. You talk about the spirituality of the food. Can you say what you mean by that, in terms of it nourishing you spiritually?

Annah: Exactly. You know, when I say food is spiritual, because our body is really, it's like a temple, and we have to nourish our body through that food. And to me, it's spiritual. And if we do not really support our body, health-wise, we're not gonna be functioning, probably, the way

we're intended to function, how God wants us to function. So really, it's like a temple for it's spiritual, we need to feed it, we need to take care of it, and that's what is it.

Nadja: Annah, I have to ask you one more thing and then we'll bring in our other guest that we have here, Lilee. I remember that in 2015 when your downtown location of Zaytoon closed, that you decided to have a party for the whole community, and you cooked for everyone for free, and invited everyone to come. And I was so struck by that decision of sort of a celebration of everything that Zaytoon had accomplished. Where did that idea come from and what was it like to do that?

Annah: Well, I love my community, and that's what matters. You know, to me, when we closed, Zaytoon was very spiritual to me, because Zaytoon was like a call for the city, and people [would] come either to connect with us, me and my best husband and talk about a lot of issues in the community--and we talked about political issues, religious issues--you know, we cared that the community had so many events either at Zaytoon or at churches, mosques, whatever, or the Farmers Market. So Zaytoon was, to me, it meant a lot for the community and I want the community to feel, you know, what is still present in my heart, and as a matter of fact, after we closed Zaytoon I started what you call my healing garden. I had a huge backyard, and then I started my healing garden, and the power behind it was the community. And closing Zaytoon was like, "Okay, I closed Zaytoon, I'm gonna open a healing garden," and it's been going on for four years now, or three years, but it's gonna happen and I've been inviting some of the community but I want to open it to the community more, all kind of people to come and I wanna cook for people.

Nadja: [Laughing] Can we come?

Annah: Of course, of course! Yeah, and that's one of the projects actually, it's Turquoise Table, you know, I wanna get--I love to cook for people, and feed them, and this "Mmm, good food, good Palestina food!"

Nadja and Omar: [Laughing]

[Music Break]

Omar: Well, we're gonna bring in another special guest. Lilee Rose is a soon-to-be graduate of the BFA Design and Technical Production program at UNC Greensboro. She did a minor in Anthropology along with Full University Honors, with a focus on Drama. Lilee has previously stage managed at UNC Greensboro on *Hair*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, and *Cowboy Mouth*, and this past summer she worked with the Arkansas Shakespeare Theatre on *Macbeth* and *Comedy of Errors*. She says she's incredibly grateful to have her final show at UNC Greensboro be part of North Carolina Theatre for Young People. Welcome to the show, Lilee!

Lilee: Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Omar: Professor Cech and I have known Lilee for a couple of years now.

Nadja: A number of years, yeah. I think the first time we co-taught a course, Lilee was in the class with us.

Omar: That's right.

Lilee: Yeah, "How Do We Know What We Know?"

Nadja: "How Do We Know What We Know?" One way is by eating food.

Lilee: Yes.

Omar: That's right. Before we started, we were having a little conversation about the namesake of this show, "Yes, and," *Yes, And Cafe*, and how you use that in your life. And I thought that you could maybe share a little bit about what you were talking about before.

Lilee: Yeah, I was telling Dr. Ali earlier that the first time I was introduced to the concept of "Yes, and" was in the Honors Colloquium class that freshmen have to take, when my professor, Frannie, came in one day and said, "We're using 'Yes, and'" and, like, explained it to us. And then in your class, Dr. Ali, you also introduced that policy of, "When you respond to someone, you're saying 'Yes, and' and then tagging your thought into the end of that." And I was telling him that I started incorporating it in my everyday language, and it really makes you aware of how you're delivering what you're saying, and the connotations of the words that you're using. And it's a good exercise to go through to be more mindful of how you interact with people.

Omar: Yeah, I was trying to think how cooking is a "Yes, and" and serving food.

Lilee: Definitely.

Omar: Because it seems like a giving activity, and I think that's the core of "Yes, and," it's that you're giving something. So when you're "Yes, and"-ing somebody, you're acknowledging them, right? And then you're offering them something to then respond to. So, I just thought that little connection.

Lilee: I also thought that with using food to heal, it is very "Yes, and" in that you're acknowledging what's going on in someone, especially on the spiritual side of what they're going through, then using food to kind of help mend them and lift them. That is a very "Yes, and" gesture.

Nadja: Well, and I was also thinking about what you were saying earlier, Omar, about the importance of the receiver, and receiving the gift as well as giving it, and that sometimes it's hard to be a receiver when we're having a conversation but it's not hard to be a receiver when someone is cooking you delicious food.

[All laughing]

Nadja: And so there's like, a natural connection there, you know what I'm saying?

Omar: Right. Yeah. Yeah.

Nadja: Like, it's a way to build, because really that's the idea of "Yes, And," it's that you're building something together. It's very easy to build together when the experience you're building is that kind of experience. It's a lovely way for people to connect on something that is not maybe particularly controversial, right, and then build the relationship so that maybe it's easier to connect about things that are more difficult. Like, Annah, you were talking about having political discussions at your restaurant. Everybody's comfortable, they're having good food, they're connected together, they can be more open, right?

Annah: Yes. Yes, definitely.

Omar: It's about creating a sort of bond with people, and in some ways we live in a political culture or climate right now where people can, like, sort of hurl insults at each other because it's online and you don't see each other. There's probably nothing--well, there is more things that are more intimate than eating food. But it's a very intimate activity, you know?

Annah: Yeah, absolutely. And that's what I thought, actually, I've been really excited about the Turquoise Table because there is a lady, she started this project, and I've been thinking, "Okay, this is beautiful things. You know, people, we need to gather around the table and just chat and talk and connect and all of these things." You know, it seems to me like human beings, they are losing this connection.

Omar: Yeah, the basic.

Annah: The basic. And, you know, actually, that's how we grow up like. In every culture, you know, we sit around the table, France specifically, in the Middle East, everywhere. In France, I was one time there and I stayed with a family and the family, they sit at the table for every meal.

Nadja: Right.

Annah: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And we talking about they stay for two hours. And it seems to me here, we are in a rush all the time. And that's why I wanna create this project.

Omar: The Turquoise Table. Sounds wonderful. When do you think you're gonna be launching this, or is it something that's--

Annah: As soon as possible.

Nadja: Well, we'll share some information when we post this.

Omar: Absolutely. I was thinking about Lilee and stage managing, and in some ways you come from a family of highly organized people. [Laughing] And I was thinking about, like, how as a stage manager--with my very small experience with off-Broadway theatre--the person who's stage managing is really making sure that everybody is set to perform their best. And you're really setting people up for success, which is the spirit of "Yes, and," actually. So what does that look like for you?

Lilee: It looks a lot like being a therapist.

Nadja: [Laughing] Interesting. Just like being a teacher!

Lilee: Yeah, yeah. It's funny, my mom's a teacher and since I've joined stage management we have a lot to talk about, because we often talk about how we have objectives to achieve. You also aren't just working with machines, you're working with people, so you have to help people along to those objectives, and that means also taking care of that person. And like, we're going into tech week for the show, which is a lot of long hours and late nights as we incorporate every aspect of the show onto the stage, and it can get stressful. And so, how do you put on the show so that you can have audiences, but not do it at the cost of people's health? So it looks a lot like sitting down and, like, having conversations with people and checking in with them, and your actors can get stressed out and reminding actors that while yes, the opening night is our goal, our goal is also to make sure this isn't your last show.

Omar: Right.

Lilee: We want you to have a life and a career past this point, so there's no reason for this to be the breaking point. And it's really, like, carrying people through the process and recognizing that there's more than just a prop to the show.

Omar: You have particular interest in young people's theatre.

Lilee: Yes.

Omar: So tell us about, like, why were you inspired to do this, and maybe talk a little bit about what are some of your future plans?

Lilee: Yeah. I assisted on *Pinkie and Blue* here my sophomore year, which was about, like, three years ago I think. And there's a scene where the actors are dressed as lions, and they run through the audience, and I was--

Nadja: I was at that show! It was wonderful!

Lilee: Yeah, and I was standing backstage and you could hear all the kids screaming and laughing, and giggling, and it just hit me. You know, it was one of those moments when you're like, "Wow, so this is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life." And I've stuck with it, and when I graduate, I'll be applying to a couple of places--two in particular, the Barter's Theatre in Virginia, and then Orlando Repertory Theatre down in Florida, because they both specialize in theatre for young audiences.

Omar: How wonderful. What a great story. And I was just thinking about, like, how both of you are, essentially, healers.

Nadja: In different ways, yeah.

Omar: In different ways. In some ways I was thinking about, like, so many ways that we can support each other, through food, through stage managing...

Nadja: Through making children laugh!

Lilee: Yeah.

Nadja: And listening to children laughing.

Omar: Yeah. And really enjoying that.

Annah: Yeah, because laughter is medicine, as well.

Nadja: Absolutely! The best medicine.

Omar: Absolutely.

Annah: The best medicine.

Nadja: Alright. Well, this has been wonderful. Thank you, everyone, for being here today. Thank you, Lilee, thank you, Annah.

Lilee: Thank you.

Annah: You're welcome.

Nadja: It's been such a pleasure to spend this time talking with you.

Annah: Thank you very much. Thank you for having me.

Lilee: Thank you for having me here.

Nadja: Many thanks to the University Teaching and Learning Center that provided the recording studio, to Ashley Scott who did our logo, to Lloyd International Honors College, to University Communications, including our production team, Matt Bryant and Ben Peterson. If you would like to sample some of Annah's amazing cooking, she is at the Greensboro Curb Market on Saturday mornings. Be sure to check her out.