



## John Seymour Episode Transcript

Rashaun: Shot Caller is for mature audiences only. 21 and over. Please drink responsibly.

### *Intro music plays.*

Rashaun: Welcome to Shot Caller, the premium podcast. We're two parts, one part pop culture. Every other week we'll be bringing a spirited conversation with bartenders, artists, influencers, and anyone else who loves a good cocktail. I'm your host for Rashawn Hall, pop culture expert and a cocktail connoisseur, thanks to growing up in New Jersey bar.

Lucinda: And I'm Lucinda Sterling. I'm a bartender and managing partner of Middle Branch in NYC. I'll be mixing it up with our guests and creating original cocktails for our Shot Caller fam. Stay tuned to the end of the episode for one-of-a-kind recipe inspired by our guest.

Rashaun: So I don't know if you guys know this, but as I said my intro literally two seconds ago, I grew up in a dive bar in Jersey. My father and his uncles owned, managed and owned a bar called Club Chester in North Newark. So it was an interesting childhood in that it was just kind of this thing that I grew up around. It was like a playground to me as a kid. You definitely would see a little hand reaching for Maraschino cherries from the underside of the bar. So like randomly, you know, you're a patriot and you just see a four-year-old 10 grabbing a bunch of cherries and running away and meeting Lucinda and her beautiful daughter Zeta. It almost seems like it's kinda just a perfect segue that she too is growing up in the bar business. So Lucinda to tell me a little bit about what it's like raising a daughter as a bartender and bar owner, you know, how you see passing on some of what you're doing.

Lucinda: So raising a little girl in the bar, you know, and giving her the confidence, instilling certain values as far as being an owner are all coming together very well. I'm going to teach her that she doesn't have to deal with certain stigmas that exist when you're a female in a bar, either at the bar or behind the bar.

Rashaun: Today's guest, like myself and like Zeta is right now, grew up in a bar. So he understands the value of, of hard work in creating these things, whether it's a business, whether it's cocktails, whether it's food. So today's guest is the co-owner of Sweet Chick, which is a great chicken and waffles chain that has several opinions here in New York and in Los Angeles. So welcome to shock collar, John Seymour.

Lucinda: So you spend a lot of time growing up in a bar.

John: Yeah. I literally grew up in a bar.

Rashaun: Tell us a little bit about what that was like.

John: My father was kind of the neighborhood bartender. I mean, it definitely gives you a lot of insight into like people, man. I mean, and, and you know, probably, you know, we had all types of guys coming in there, guys and girls coming in there. One guy that comes to is this guy named Lenny Storm, I remember him. He was like, yeah, that's awesome. Yeah. Yeah. Lenny Storm who wore a suit who was complete maniac, but that was rich, you know, he was kinda like, or at least from my perspective, I was like, oh, Lenny's got the money, you know. Um, and you got a guy like Phil Curtain who drives a limousine for rich people. Right. Um, I can think of other names. Allie Moore who was the ex cop who got shot in his leg and you know, and now it's not a bouncer at a strip club, um, you know, all the guys who worked in a neighborhood, you know, it was just, had a lot of guys, garbagemen, the firemen, and all that. Yeah, it was just a really interesting time and it kind of really unique, cool way to grow up.

Rashaun: So is your father being a bartender what inspired you to become a bartender?

John: I would bartend, you know, as a kid, just making extra couple of dollars, you know, after school I'd go into my father would work day shifts and night shifts. So after school we would go in on like weekdays and he'd be there and he'd sit down and we'd go behind the bar and make 20 bucks from guys giving us tips and whatnot, you know, we didn't get allowances. It was like come in and carry some cases for me.

Lucinda: No child labor laws?

John: No, no, nobody's thinking about that. During Christmas break and stuff like that I would work in restaurants and my father, one of my father's friend owned a restaurant down on the, uh, down by the docks, South Street Seaport. So I would, you know, bus tables and stuff. I'm on vacations and during the summers I would work as a doorman and apartment buildings. So, you know, my father was Irish and all the superintendents were Irish, so they all drank in the bar as well. So when I was 15 I'd be working in buildings and have to lie and say I was 18. So like I felt like a lot of this kind of early age from my work career, was just watching people a lot. Um, so like if you, if anybody lives in a doorman building, the doorman knows a lot about, you know,

Lucinda: Oh, absolutely.

John: You know from there, you know, I did a lot of miscellaneous jobs. I didn't end up going to college, started hanging out a lot. I got myself in a lot of trouble and uh, and then ultimately became a bartender when I was about 24 years old, actually. Started working in an Irish bar uptown and kind of felt myself like, Oh wow, I'm kind of like, right where my father was. It's Kinda crazy, like they say like, you follow in your father's footsteps. And I was like, I didn't really. I'm actually, I kind of did because my father was older when he had us and, and uh, you know, he was sober. He was sober bartender and always heard some stories about, he would never really tell me stories but stories of how wild he was when he was young. And the same happened to me.

So I ended up getting sober at 24 years old and became a bartender after that. So, you know, not by design but by destiny or by, you know, it's Kinda crazy. I was like, wow, holy shit. I'm actually following this guy's footsteps. Yeah. And, and it's so funny because I think he got sober probably around like 40 years old or something. And uh, he used to always say, if I had gotten sober earlier, I, he was a big baseball fan. I read a Boston Red Sox fan. He said, uh, I'd be the manager of the Red Sox, you know, and it's funny because I ended up getting sober earlier than he had in life and now I own my own business, which is something I think he always wanted to do. So it's kind of, I'm actually realizing this this second right now. I'm like, wow.

Lucinda: That's amazing. An epiphany.

Rashaun: This is what this show is for. It's part therapy. It's part fun. So, so talking about the business, Sweet Chick. What was the inspiration?

John: Sweet Chick. We started five years ago in Brooklyn. I had, I had already opened, uh, I'd gotten into the restaurant business already before Sweet Chick, opened up a little spot called Pops that was open about 12 years ago in Williamsburg. My father used to make a burger for the guys in the neighborhood, like just would go to the grocery store and get hamburger meat, so he would just make a couple of burgers every day. So when I found this space that was serving like frozen burgers, it was kind of a shit hole in Brooklyn. I was living in Brooklyn and uh, I knew the place and the guy who I, I literally found on Craigslist that the guy who was selling the business, because I was just, you know, I was bartending for years and I had saved some money and I was like, I want to kind of do something different. I just met my wife who went to culinary school and was very interested in cooking and food and kind of got me more interested in that. And uh, so I, I, I met the guy who was selling them. He was actually selling a different business, but I talked him into selling the one that I knew. And opened up Pops, which is essentially like an homage to my father.

Lucinda: Oh cool.

John: The menu was like an old picture of him. So it was like, you know, kind of that was my entrance into the, into the food world, into the food world and operating. So I learned a lot there. I had heard the story of chicken and waffles and how it was invented in Harlem. People, that famous Rosco's in the West Coast. Most people think that style in the South, obviously fried chicken in the South, but I'm a jazz clubs. Four in the morning, guy went into the kitchen, said, I don't know if I want chicken and waffles. And the chef was like, uh, you know, I got fried chicken leftover and I can make waffles.

So it was kind of a breakfast dinner type item. I was a fan of the dish, you know, it, a marriage of flavors, kind of a, a unique dish. And it was also fun, right? To me it represented fun and that's kind of what I wanted to have, you know, around the restaurant. That was the really what we were trying to build. Um, and then that kind of grew into a, well, I still wanted it to be a restaurant you could come to five nights a week and not everybody wants to eat fried chicken at five times a week. So I was like, well, let's create a full menu around this. Let's say like, this is what we do, chicken and waffles, but let's create a, a menu around it. And I was like, I need to find a great chef as well, and that's kind of where we've come to today. And the menu has really evolved. It's still evolving, right? So we do a seasonal menu and the specials are always evolving and you know, that's usually what I eat when I go in there. I'll look, whatever's on the special board and that's what I want to eat. And then you'll see me with a piece of fried chicken later, a standing outside the restaurant.

Rashaun: Say what? What?

John: Yeah, usually like one piece of fried chicken and I usually stay at if the weather's good, like so later today I'll probably be on the street eating, throwing the bones in the street.

### ***Musical intro***

Lucinda: Hey Shot Caller fam. Are you guys planning a bridal shower or maybe a birthday party for somebody who's turning 21? Or how about watching the game at home?

Rashaun: Well, no matter what you're planning, the perfect party favor would be a nipyata. Check out nipyata.com. They have awesome pinatas that are filled with little nips, aka airplane bottles of liquor. It's perfect for the over 21 party. So go to nipyata.com and use the promo code shotcaller at checkout so they know we sent you. Cheers.

### ***Music fades***

Rashaun: So the first location was the Williamsburg location,

John: So the first location was Williamsburg and you know, a good six months into it. I was like, wow man, I think we really have something special. You know, music has been a very important piece of the puzzle for us. And again, it's not, it hasn't really been thought out and planned that way, but you know, the jazz scene really gave birth to the chicken waffles, the dish itself and you know, the music that myself and the staff, the original opening staff was listening to was really important to us in and, and really kind of it made a difference, you know, um, you, you got a lot of places to play cool music, but we were really, you know, we were playing music for the people that were eating with us to bob their head to and to sing along with.

And you know, that turned into our Saturdays and Sunday brunches would be, you know, we'd put on like TLC radio, you know, so it'd be like nineties R B, and you know, you're seeing people sing like SWV and our star, our servers and our staff come first for me. So I want them to be as happy as possible and that that'll translate to a happy customer and you know, you have to have people working there that are happy because they're, those are the people that are going to build a brand and build this restaurant. But just the enthusiasm that people had, I was just like, wow man, this is some special shit. And then also looking around the room, you know, I would say all the time, I would say, and I still say, I'm like, man, look at all these people in this room.

They all come from different backgrounds. There's Lenny Storm, there's the Bodega guy, you know what I'm saying? We still have all those people. So you know, all different backgrounds and cultures and come from different places. We have tourists that come from who knows where, you know, guys that lived down the block, you know, so I just thought we had something special. A little bit for a year into it, I found another location and I was like, I'm going to do this again.

And uh, took over in the city on Ludlow Street. Um, that was a place called Max Fish and you know, Max Fish was an institution to a lot of people. And yeah. And you know, I grew up in New York City. I used to hang out downtown. I used to get tattooed on Ludlow Street. I have friends that actually have the 178 Ludlow is the address Max Fish tattooed on them. So it was, it was a big deal for me to take over that space as well. And it was, it was kind of a, almost like an emotional experience because like I would hear during construction, people walk by and be like somebody who just came from out of town or some shit that used to hang out at Max Fish and be like, Yo, fuck this man who fucks have a max person. I'd be standing there, I'd almost want to be like, Yo my man, because I'm like, I'm actually fighting the good fight, like, Chipotle didn't get this space. I would get a little like a almost emotional about it, but it's, you know, just the little things that I did like where they're taking all the old wood from Max Fish and repurposing it in the space because that's important to me. Right. It's like nobody else is gonna know that, but it's, to me it's important as the juju. It's also the respect of, of what was here before.

John: Yeah. At our one year anniversary in Williamsburg. I had just signed the lease to Ludlow Street. So I was like, let's do a party. Let's have all the homies come through. Let's, let's invite people that have been supporting us from day one, you know, the customers that we see on a regular basis. I, uh, I was like, I want to do something special and something fun and for whatever reason it

popped out in my mind. I was like, I was like, you know, it'd be dope if I got like Raekwon the Chef to come perform. and I don't even know why. I said Raekwon 'cause Raekwon was in my favorite rapper. He's one of my favorite rappers and I was just like, just because it's Raekwon the Chef. And I was like, that would be fun. I didn't know him, but I started reaching out some friends who I was like, you know, maybe somebody who's got a contact. And the day of the party, and I was just like, fuck it, I'm gonna make this happen. Um, so I called somebody up, another person up, next thing I know I'm speaking of Rae's brother. And he's like, yeah, we'll do it. I said, cool.

So I go to the party, everybody's in there and nobody knew who was coming. I had them come in through the back entrance into the kitchen and I was like, Yo, I'm down to do. And he was like, he's like, well, if I said I'm going to grab the mic, say a couple things. He's like, put on "Cream." I was like, yes, because we've always been saying chicken rules, everything around me. And so. So anyway, I go out to grab the mic and I announced, I said, you can't spell waffles les. We're opening on Ludlow Street, you know, blasse bla. I said my two, you know, two cents. And I was like, the chef has a couple of words, and my chef at the time started to walk back behind the bar and I was like, Nah. And then Raekwon busted out performance and music is a big part of what we do and it's just um, you know, because it's, it's really what we're all about in general. But you know, first is creating community and you know, just having fun, to be honest with you.

Rashaun: And speaking of music, you have a partner that is in the music industry. How did, how did that partnership with that musician come about?

John: So the second location, which was on Ludlow Street some time went by and I was like this, you know, things were going well and I'm like, man, this business is really dope and I'm starting to think, okay, can we, can we replicate this again and when, what can we do? And I got an email from the CEO of Mass Appeal, which has a record label and a media company. If you're not familiar, it used to be a magazine for years. And Mass Appeal had actually done a story on me, so I got the email through the website and I was like, you know, a guy wanted, his name is Peter, Peter Bittenbender. He wanted to do a 30-person dinner at the Brooklyn restaurant. We don't take reservations.

So I said, you know what, let's make it happen. Um, it was his anniversary, his wedding anniversary, you know, I happened to be at the restaurant that night and you know, we started talking and we had a mutual friend and there was a girl that he was with. They had mutual friends with me that like I grew up with. So we started talking. He was like, man, I love Sweet Chick. I love the one on Ludlow. Man, such a good vibe. You thinking about doing anymore of these? I said, yeah, you know, I'm thinking about it. I said, you know, I just, just opening the Ludlow one not long ago and you know, that cost a lot of money and, and he's like, all my money's no problem. I'm like, yeah, okay. I said, you must say you have rich friends than I do. And he goes, no. He goes, I'm seriously, we should definitely sit down and talk about me. I think it's a great business that you have. And I was like, cool.

Then we were sitting down and just talking about it and he's like, yeah man, he's, I could see this thing being, you know, growing and, and, and do it more. And I was like, yeah, I do too. You, I have the plan in my head. I just got to take some time to figure it out. And, and then, you know, he just by chance was like so Nas is his business partner at Mass Appeal and also my favorite rapper growing up. Um, yeah, I think, yeah, it worked out. It works out. So he says, uh, he goes, Yo, I think Nas could be interested in this. So I was like, Oh wow, okay, cool. That would be dope. And then, you know, we left the meeting and that evening he texted me and Peter's like, now his friends have been there. He, you know, he, he says, I think it's really dope and he wants to meet you. So about half hour later he's like, Yo, he wants to fly down to South by Southwest mutual. I'm like, Oh shit, this is like real shit. Yeah. Like this is what happens when you're like a up and coming

artists then you getting signed, you know, type of thing. And I'm like, oh, okay, cool.

So go down into South By and meet Nas backstage. This is my favorite rapper growing up. Right? So I used to, I used to ride around down the block from here on a bmx bike with a boombox. You know, me and my friend, so listening to Nas. So it was, it's like we're like, oh shit, okay. Yeah, he comes in really just kind of started just talking about the business and like what it is that we're about and like what the things that we're doing and kind of like what we're, what we're trying to do. And uh, he was just like, Yo man. He's like, I fuck with them and this is dope. Sounds really dope, you know, let's, let's talk more.

A couple of weeks later, he's in town so he hits me up to go eat dinner. So we go to the Brooklyn spot, we're sitting, eating dinner, just talking more that side to mass vehicle Run the Jewels was performing, performing on the river, right in Williamsburg that night. And like we were talking about basketball playoffs were on at the time. And uh, you know, uh, we gotta I gotta go down to the show. I was like, alright, cool. So we go down and we're backstage. He gets on stage and does a song with them, "Made You Look," he does his verse from "Made You Look," and he gets off stage and he's like, Yo, let's go, let's go watch the game. Because I, earlier I'd said like, oh, I live around the block, you know, if we want to go watch the game. You can always go watch the game and then, uh, he's like let's go to your crib and watch the game. I was like, cool. So my kids are sleeping. Call my wife. And I was like, Yo, I'm going to bring Nas up to watch the game.

Rashaun: No matter who you're bringing home. It could be Nas, or Jesus Christ, you still gotta call your wife. You still have to say, Oh Jesus is coming by.

John: You know what it is, you know, it's like the kids went, just just went to sleep. She's on the couch, she's in my boxer shorts, you know, and like chilling, you know, full chill mode.

Rashaun: No, I understand.

John: So I was like tidy up. And uh, yeah. So that was the first time really kind of hung out. So then he came to the house, watched the game. One of the funniest things that happened was he, he had a Hennessy commercial that was running where it's like, I think he was on the train and it's like he does a voiceover and his commercial came on while we were watching the game and it was just so funny because we were all sitting in there and like everybody was just kind of quiet and I looked over at him and he had a Henny in his hand and he's just like. Everyone just started laughing, you know, it was just like such a funny moment. It's just a very memorable moment.

We talked more, obviously after that met and he invested in the restaurant and you know, we'd talked about kind of the plan for expansion and since then we opened LA, Prospect Heights near the Barclay Center and a in Queens. And Queens is the newest location and that was something that was important to him when we first met even he was just like, Yo, we gotta bring them to Queens. So within a year, literally 4/20 for no, no marijuana related, but is it reasonable? Is Our opening party in La and we just opened in Queens, so within a year we opened up Los Angeles, Prospect Heights, Queens, and we also opened something in Citi Field, which was totally the other thing.

Lucinda: Cool. Do you find it really challenging to have all these locations and keep up the consistency that you tried...

John: That's the big challenge now. Right? So now we have five locations and we have a kind of a quick service model that we're doing at Citi Field. We just opened up three restaurants and we have some other plans maybe in the works, but right now, um, you know, it's, it's been a hustle this

past year to get these spots open and right now it's like, you know, and everything's going great. But again, it's like how can we be better every day? So I'm, I'm in the office, I'm dubbing this, which I have an office now. It's so crazy. My office used to be sitting on stoops and coffee shops, you know, I'm dubbing this summer. I'm like, it's the summer of relaxation, right? That doesn't mean we're all going on vacation. That means like not opening a restaurant right now and we're now it's time to like let's look at all of the businesses that we have operating and let's, how can we fine tune them? You know, how can we nurture those restaurants?

Rashaun: In terms of the bar program at Sweet Chick.

John: So the original bar program was designed by my friend Cynthia, who I used to work with. I used to bartend with who is a, she's a wizard. She, she helped me put the first one together. Currently my beverage director, his name's Wilmer. He's been with us for four years. He's also like, you know, it's part of the family, you know, Wilmer's extremely passionate about what he does. So I don't necessarily even have to think about are the cocktails good?

Lucinda: Yeah. Is there one that....

John: Our biggest sellers or the Sweet Chick, Purple Drank. And then you know, we go seasonally with the cocktail menus as well, but I'm sober 16 years so I'm also, I can't really taste the product.

Rashaun: As someone who did on your, on your behalf. I had to come through and chill.

John: Yeah. Had to come through and chill.

Rashaun: Spring was coming. Yeah. We went and absolutely loved it. The names of all the drinks are all very hip hop in New York inspired as well, so.

Lucinda: Is there a cucumber in that one?

Rashaun: Uh, no it was a aperol gin, grapefruit, lime and tonic. I literally do just remember that. So now we're. Yeah. So yeah, you know, so one more will be coming through so the next time he looked for us. So John, what is, uh, you know, we're going to let you get out of here so you can run your business. What's next?

John: What we're calling it a Little Sweet Chick because it's like a very different take out kinda friendly menu and we're going to be doing a couple festivals. So we're doing Golf Ball, I think to do an AfroPunk. We're working on a couple of other festivals. We're going to do a bunch of festivals this summer in the New York area and that will be fun.

Lucinda: Congratulations on all of this.

Rashaun: Yes, John, thank you so much for coming.

John: Thanks for having me guys.

Lucinda: It's good to have you, cheers

## **COCKTAIL RECIPE**

Lucinda: Today, I'm making a drink called Just Hatched for John Seymour, of Sweet Chick. And the base of this drink is all syrups and fruit juices. Kind of limited ingredients with the nonalcoholic drink. I

don't have any tea with me, no hibiscus syrup that I can use, but I think that there are flavors in tea that you can unlock using fresh, fresh ingredients. In this case I'm flaming orange twist and I'm going to shake the drink up with that. And that's going to be the Orange Julius addition. And we've got an ounce of lemon juice and fresh lemon juice will hopefully cook the whole egg. One ounce of ginger syrup. Half an ounce of honey syrup. In terms of the honey, we use the highest concentration that's shaken bulb with a cocktail without being too sticky to the bottom of the glass, half an ounce or pomegranate syrup and a flamed orange twist.

So drop the whole egg in and it's a medium size egg because you get the right balance of egg yolk to egg white. And we're going to shake that first dry without any ice and then shake it with ice. So now that we're shaking it with ice, we're going to help pull that flamed oil from the orange twist. Then the final step is to strain it into a glass and then the final component is a bit of Indie Tonic. Indie Tonic will help give it a little bit of a dryness and the mouthfeel. Cheers.

John: Cheers. Looks good, too. Wow, it's amazing. I would not know there was an egg in there if you didn't tell me, or if I didn't see, actually, I really wouldn't know there was an egg. That's great.

Lucinda: Cheers to you.

John: Thanks.

### **Music fades**

Rashaun: Last call, everybody.

Lucinda: I'm Lucinda Sterling

Rashaun: And I'm Rashaun Hall. In the immortal words of Kanye West, "Here's a toast to the assholes."

Lucinda: Thanks for listening. Our theme song is "You Know You Want To" by Dan Phillipson. Our producer is Samira Tazari. The podcast is produced and distributed by Lantigua Williams & Co.

Rashaun: Big thanks to Middle Branch in New York City for letting us hang today. And thank you for listening. Follow us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram @ShotCallerPod and use the hashtag #ShotCallerPod to let us know what you want to hear coming up, what's shaking, what's stirred, what's twisted, anything and everything we want to hear about it. And make sure you subscribe, rate, and review us on iTunes or Google Play.

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