

*Make Me Care About...*

Make Me Care About...Ancient Grains

Podcast episode seven transcript

**Jen Hatmaker:** You guys, welcome to the show. Get excited. I am. I have been super looking forward to this particular interview. All my favorite stuff is happening today. I'm talking to a chef. I love chefs. I'm talking about food. I love food. We're talking about sustainable sourcing. That jazzes me up.

So today's conversation is so fun. I'm talking to chef, restaurant owner, founder of Yolélé, all about ancient grains. And specifically fonio, which you probably don't know what that is, but you're about to.

Created in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, this is Make Me Care About... I'm Jen Hatmaker, and with me is Pierre Thiam. And today Chef Thiam is helping us care about ancient grains, and specifically fonio. Chef Thiam, welcome. I am so delighted to meet you.

**Pierre Thiam:** Thanks for having me, Jen.

**Jen Hatmaker:** I am famously enamored with chefs, and so you're just going to have to forgive my enthusiasm. It knows no bounds.

**Pierre Thiam:** You are forgiven.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Oh, yay, I'm forgiven. Perfect. Now we're friends. Down and dirty, what exactly is an ancient grain?

**Pierre Thiam:** An ancient grain is a grain that's been domesticated in ancient times, usually, say, a million years. So fonio, for instance, has been around 5,000 years, so it counts as an ancient grain.

Many of the grains that we have today are ancient grains. Rice, wheat, quinoa. Those are grains that come with lots of history and culture, and oftentimes very good for the environment. They have to be resilient. That's why they're ancient. They're still around after all this time.

**Jen Hatmaker:** That makes sense. So how exactly do ancient grains grow?

**Pierre Thiam:** Well, humanity began growing ancient grain with the simple method of tilling the soil, planting the seeds, waiting for the rain, waiting for the season, and then it grows. And depending on the type of grain, harvest comes sooner or later. Case of fonio, for instance, it's the fastest maturing grain. Within two months you can harvest fonio.

And it grows in an area called the Sahel. Senegal, my country of origin, is located south of the Sahara desert. So really dry and arid. And fonio thrives in that area. So it's a grain that's drought resistant. It's a grain that grows in poor soil, and not many grains can grow in poor soil. But it's also a grain that regenerates the soil, because it has deep roots that add nutrients to the soil.

Some other grains require more irrigation, more water, and that's the problem we are having now. Because water is becoming more and more precious. So grains like rice or corn or others, wheat, require water, require certain conditions. And they become less and less resilient.

So for fonio, really all you need is wait for the first rain to come, and they really throw the seeds, barely tilling the soil. And that's why it's called the lazy farmer's crop. Because after throwing the seed, they can go and chill and wait for the harvest to come. Even if the rain is not a good rainy season, fonio is guaranteed to grow.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So besides being super fast growing and resilient and easy to grow, are there any other benefits that fonio has for the farmers who grow that particular crop?

**Pierre Thiam:** Oh, absolutely. So the fact that it grows fast is very, very important. Because the farmers, they depend on the harvest. And sometime harvest is not good, because the rainy season hasn't been good. But they know they can rely on fonio to come even in between harvests.

So it comes in two months and they can wait for the other season, the other crop to come maybe in the next two months. They know fonio will be there. That's why they also call it the hungry rice. Because in season of hunger, fonio is there to guarantee that farmers will have something to eat.

It's also a grain that's very nutritious, that fits in the category of what we call super foods. It's a tiny grain, but it's nutty and it cooks really fast. And it's very versatile. So you can use it in so many different kind of cuisine, all different sauces. It takes the flavors, because it's neutral.

**Jen Hatmaker:** I think I'm most fascinated with how fonio is this quadruple threat, right? It's good for the environment. It's sustainable. It is so good for our bodies. It's delicious to taste.

Would you mind taking us back just a little bit? Let's go to the beginning. How and when and where and why did you fall in love with food? What was your relationship with food and the kitchen and cooking when you were a kid?

**Pierre Thiam:** Oh boy. I grew up in Dakar, Senegal, in West Africa. And if you know a little bit about our culture, food is central. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner is prepared from scratch.

My mom go to the market pretty much on a daily basis, so everything is fresh. You become enamored with food. Even though as a boy I wasn't in the kitchen, this is the gender-based activity in Senegal, but you're still into the kitchen.

**Jen Hatmaker:** You jumped over that gender barrier, because you have built an enormous, incredible, impressive career in food. Can you just talk a little bit how you went from a kid who came home and got fresh fish for lunch, to what it is that you do now? How did you get from A to B?

**Pierre Thiam:** It wasn't obvious. Again, like I said, it is gender-based, so I had no dreams of becoming a chef growing up. And so I did my studies, and went to university for physics and chemistry in Senegal.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Oh, my.

**Pierre Thiam:** Oh, boy, yes. Oh, boy. And I had no love for it. And I found this university college, out of all places in Ohio, that accepted my application and got a student visa. On my way to Ohio, I had to stop by New York City. And 30 years later, I was still in New York City. My very first job was a busboy.

So the chef in that kitchen became a friend of mine, because he also liked practicing his French with me. He was like, "After your busing shift, why don't you come in the kitchen and start washing dishes the way I did?" And that's when it's interesting, because you start learning the salads. You start learning the dressings and the vinegarettes, and that's chemistry. All the sauces, the heat, everything.

I could connect with that in a way that was much more interesting than what I was studying in the labs back in university. And that's really when I started to look for the food from back home, the food from my origins. That became a mission for me. And that became my very first African bistro that I called Yolélé in Brooklyn, early 2000.

**Jen Hatmaker:** That's incredible.

**Pierre Thiam:** And that boss gave me an opportunity to write my first cookbook. And this is when the idea for the grains, the ingredients, really came to me. If I could figure out a way to create a supply chain that would connect the small farming communities in Africa all the way to the global market, I could have, not only benefit my readers so they can create the flavor that I'm trying to bring to them in an authentic way, but I also could have an impact, 'cause those farming communities are among the poorest ones in the world.

And now I'm thinking even further. I'm like, "If I could do it, I could do it also by bringing ingredients that really also have an impact on the environment. Ingredients that are grown in a regenerative type of way. Ingredients that are not affecting the climate."

'Cause when you think about climate change, the food system is one of the main culprit. There are amazing products in Africa that are being ignored because they're not part of the system. And one ingredient in particular caught my attention and that's this ancient grain called fonio.

**Jen Hatmaker:** That's incredible. I mean there's no downside. Can you elaborate on particularly how farming as we are currently experiencing it primarily is enabling climate change? How is that a contributor?

**Pierre Thiam:** Oh, absolutely. So that's the food system... I'm going to come back to that one monoculture. That's the food system that is really trying to bring to the market the same product year round. So for that food system to succeed, that means that year round they need to grow rice, they need to grow wheat, they need to grow potatoes, they need to grow those for billions of consumers.

And the world doesn't work like, nature wasn't designed like that. So to do that, we have to, not only bring chemicals, fertilizers, we need to irrigate it. But we are also destroying the water by adding those chemicals that go down into our rivers, and then that's affecting us. It's affecting the planet in that way. It's affecting our health, those who are drinking it. It's affecting the fish population.

But now, because the demand is growing, because that's the only crop that we have imposed upon our planet, we need to also keep growing more. And to grow more, because our limited land supply, we need to destroy forest.

If we can figure out a way to reverse it, if we figure out a way to grow crops by season. If we can figure out a way to think of profit in a different way than just the shareholders' profit, but think of

profit in how the communities are benefiting. There's no way we can even think of 10 years from now, because it's going to be 10 billion people. We're going to have to feed the 10 billion people with the same system.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Certainly. So when we are talking about the global phenomenon that affect, obviously, most farming practices, like other crops, aren't these ancient grains also at the mercy the impact of climate change?

**Pierre Thiam:** Oh, yes, they are. But the advantage of these ancient crops is their resiliency. The effects of climate change are inconsistent rainfall, degradation of the soil. Those crops have proven that not only they can make it through those, but they can also reverse the effect of climate change, because they can restore the soil.

Fonio's agriculture restored the topsoils. Which is very important, because it's growing just south of the Sahara desert. Increasing its agriculture is also a way to slow the advance of the desert, because it will restore the topsoil. And other crops can also grow in the soil, including trees that are resilient as well.

Providing we find also a way to open markets for those trees, so the community that grow those trees can benefit from it. And that's how we create prosperous community that goes in harmony with nature.

**Jen Hatmaker:** All right. So far, this is super interesting to me. I love to talk about the future of sustainable food. Coming up in the second half, stick around, because I am really interested to find out what are the challenges that farmers, particularly in West Africa, are facing here.

I'm also interested in the effect of climate change on fonio. Also does fonio have a positive net effect on our environment. This is Make Me Care About... created in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

This is Make Me Care About... I'm Jen Hatmaker, and with me is Pierre Thiam, chef, restaurateur, cookbook author extraordinaire. And today Chef Thiam is helping us care about ancient grains. Chef, what have you learned currently is the biggest challenge that farmers in Africa face today?

**Pierre Thiam:** Well, one of the biggest challenge is they don't have access to market. So what they have is, they have amazing crops, they know how to grow them, but it's limited to their own subsistence. Another challenge is, there's not enough research being done on the amazing crops that they have. On the agronomy, or better agricultural practices, on how to improve the yield.

So they're stuck with that method of growing those crops that was taught to them over time by the ancestors over generations. And there are ways to improve it, while still becoming more efficient, while still keeping good agricultural practices. So that's the challenges that they're having. Lack of investments, lack of access to market.

**Jen Hatmaker:** Uh-huh. So let's say that is not met with any solution. They can't find a foothold in the global market or improve farming practices. What are the consequences? Like what's at stake here if nothing changes?

**Pierre Thiam:** I can't even begin to think about it. If nothing changes, it's our whole food system that's collapsing. And we know that the food system is collapsing because of monoculture, because of the limited diet, because we don't bring these crops into the market.

What happens when you don't bring these crops into the market? They disappear. There's a solution. That solution depends on unlocking the potential of those underutilized crops.

If we fail to do it, that means we are going to lose the knowledge that came with those crops. We're going to lose that biodiversity. We are going to be stuck with the same monocultural food system and cultural system that is destroying the planet at a fast pace. So that's not an option.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So even if monocultures weren't so catastrophic for the climate and for the earth, there are other challenges to it. We've heard from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that farmers in general are now facing soaring fertilizer prices.

The International Fertilizer Development Center is warning of about a 30% decline in fertilizer usage in Africa, because farmers are curtailing their purchases just due to rising prices. So even if it wasn't so terrible for the climate, it's not affordable. It's not a sustainable financial model for farmers either.

**Pierre Thiam:** The Ukraine war is just the thing that revealed our fragility, the fragility of our food system, in Africa in particular. Because fertilizers market is mainly coming from that region, Ukraine and Russia. The fertilizers from around the world is coming from there, as well as the wheat.

So we had to face a hike in poverty. And less fertilizers also meant less production, because we didn't prepare ourselves for type of agriculture without using those entrants. This war in Ukraine has shown to us that it is imperative that we free ourselves from this dependency on those fertilizers.

We knew already that it wasn't sustainable and it was hurting us. But now more so the urgency of just figuring out a way to grow our food without those entrants. Which is feasible, but greed is stopping us from that. Because now we're depending on them. Even the seeds of the stuff that we're growing is being sold to us season by season, which is not the way it should work.

**Jen Hatmaker:** These are a solution to more than one problem. These actually answer quite a few issues facing, not just the farmers and the local community, but food security at large.

So I'm curious, can you tell me a little bit more about some of the other ancient grains? You and I have talked a lot about fonio, but any of the other ancient grains that you believe can also be leveraged by farmers?

**Pierre Thiam:** Oh, yes. I can tell you about millet. Even though fonio is from the millet family, millet is important. That's another one that grows in Africa and Asia that we need to include into our food system. And another one is sorghum too, from the same family. Another one is teff. Both of those are grown in Africa. Sorghum is grown outside of Africa too, but it's not also being used in our food system, not the right way.

There are resilient crops that are grown... Amaranth is another one. And I can go on and on. One of them is, we call it nere in Senegal. It's the seed from a tree, it's from the acacia family. That seed is fermented and it's an amazing, amazing flavor agent. It's like umami.

And the amazing thing about that tree is the fact that it grows there, its roots fix the nitrogen. So it's like just planting crops like fonio around that tree increases the yield of fonio naturally. So nature has already offered a solution.

Another plant is baobab. Baobab is also a tree that grows in the region. Amazing, the fruit of the baobab has one of the highest amounts of vitamin C. It's quite delicious. I mean you can use it in yogurts, in drinks. And the leaves of the baobab are amazing too, in the salad. And it could be used as a thickener for sauces.

It's very important that we don't think of one particular grain as the answer. It shouldn't work like that. It's important that we think of systems. And just open markets for all of them, not only for one crop. Otherwise, what's going to happen, the farmers are going to say, "Hey, there's a market for fonio, let's grow fonio year round."

We want them to grow fonio, to grow other millet, to grow teff, to grow sorghum, to grow quinoa. We need all of those to have an abundance for our own health to as we have a diversified diet. And that's really what our body requires, and that's what our planet requires, it turns out.

**Jen Hatmaker:** So Chef, as we get close to wrapping up here, let's just go pie in the sky. Let's just imagine a future, the one that you're working toward, where we are only growing sustainable crops. Can you just talk about what benefit that would have on society overall, globally? How would the increased use of ancient grains really benefit us all?

**Pierre Thiam:** Well, this is a future that, to me, is taking us back to the past. And you did say ancient grains, and that's really for all of those reasons. We will be bringing food to its right place, which is at the center, really. Food is really where it begins.

The small farmers will have access to a market, and he will have access to fair trade, right? Fair price for him. It would be a way for him to have a dignified living from his own products, not from anything that was imposed on him. A food should be something that will be accessible, that would be a given right to every single human being.

And that is the place where we need to be. But that's the revolution. When we don't think profit as like bottom line for shareholders in big corporations, there's impact on our health, impact on our planet, impact on the communities that have been growing it, and that should be benefiting from it. That's the time when we will be going to that place, but with more access for everyone.

**Jen Hatmaker:** And we'll be healthier to boot with this diversified diet. Yes, I love that. Well, I'll tell you, I'm going to absolutely buy my first package of fonio. I cannot wait. I'm going to tell you how I cooked it, and looking forward to introducing it to my family, to my repertoire, to my recipe list. I'm so delighted to have learned this from you.

And I am thank you so much. Not just for your time today, but for using your influence and your space and your voice and your knowledge to help change the world in a really beautiful and positive way. I'm telling you, if we didn't already, you have made us care about ancient grains. So thanks for being with us today, Chef.

**Pierre Thiam:** It's my pleasure, Jen.

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**Jen Hatmaker:** I loved learning about this today. If you'd like to learn even more about Chef Pierre Thiam's work, check out the show notes, you guys. And if you liked this episode, definitely follow the show to hear more things to care about. And we'd be super grateful if you shared this episode with a friend.