

Sawbones 493: Sea Moss

Published April 9, 2024

[Listen here at themcelroy.family](#)

Intro (Clint McElroy): *Sawbones* is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it!

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to *Sawbones*, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: Now, Sydnee, I don't know how you learned my nickname in high school, but here I see it at the top of your research document here. And I am... I'm really touched that you would look into my personal life that much.

Sydnee: Your nickname in high school was sea moss?

Justin: Yeah, just sea moss, but like with a C, the letter C, and then it's M-O-Z, is how most people spelled it like, "What's up, C-moz?!"

Sydnee: What was that for? What... What... Like... How did that nickname come to be?

Justin: I didn't want to ask because my fear was that it was bullying. And I didn't want to ask for specifics, so I just accepted C-moz, that's me, that's my brand.

Sydnee: [unsure] Okay...

Justin: It was a short period in high school, mainly in my media studies class. I was not well-liked. But here we are today.

Sydnee: I... I mean if it makes you feel better, while I cannot think of any logical connection that might have to you or your name...

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: I also... I can't, off the top of my head because I was trying, come up with something insulting that it stood for.

Justin: Maybe it's just cool. Maybe I'm just... Maybe I'm just a cool guy.

Sydnee: What do you know about sea moss, Justin?

Justin: Well, he is a complicated 13-year-old boy—

Sydnee: No, no, no, no, no, no.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: S-E-A.

Justin: Oh, nothing.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Is it like sea glass? I know about sea glass.

Sydnee: I mean in the sense that it is from the sea. [laughs]

Justin: Much like chicken of the sea or...

Sydnee: Which is tuna.

Justin: Conches. [laughs] There's lots of sea stuff, guys. I could go on for days.

Sydnee: Well, I mean, it's... Here's the thing. It's really big.

Justin: The ocean. That's so true.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: And a lot of people forget about it. We have- There is so much of it that's unexplored.

Sydnee: Yeah, and—

Justin: At least... [sarcastic] There is at least five to ten percent of the ocean floor that we have not filmed in its entirety. At least five to ten percent.

Sydnee: You know that number is way too small.

Justin: I dunno. I dunno!

Sydnee: Yeah, there are... There are people who are experts—

Justin: Felt right to me when I said it.

Sydnee: ... in that part of science who are listening to this show, who are like, "Justin!"

Justin: Honey, if science people have not realized how much of *Sawbones*, I spend just giving them like a little bit of a ribbing, just a gentle ribbing, then I don't know what podcast they've been listening to for these many years.

Just having a little fun, Poindexter.

Sydnee: That's Okay.

Justin: What? Why is your skin so thin, dork?

Sydnee: Hey. Hey! Hey! Watch it.

Justin: No. I'm the jock. Now you're C-moz. [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] I—

Justin: I'm gonna... Now I'm gonna take your pizza at lunchtime and let you just eat rolls and peas.

Sydnee: Aw. Don't take anybody's pizza.

Justin: [jock voice] Too late! [laughs] I got 'em.

Sydnee: I had not—

Justin: Here's your pizza back.

Sydnee: I had not heard of sea moss the TikToks, from the social media myself. But one of our listeners—

Justin: I've never heard of it.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: When you said, "Have you seen these TikToks", I had no idea what you're talking about.

Sydnee: No, I— Well, I hadn't seen them myself. But one of our listeners wrote in — thank you Moore — and sent us an email asking what was the deal with sea moss. And I was like, well, I have no idea. I haven't heard of it. So then I... of course, I had to ruin my algorithm.

Justin: Mm-hmm. Yet again.

Sydnee: Yet again, for you.

Justin: Hey, hey listen—

Sydnee: For you.

Justin: I've always felt bad for you, but if you saw how much of my TikTok is gamer pills at this point, it's... it's pretty troubling.

Sydnee: That's on you. So I looked up, what are people doing? And a lot of what I found were people on TikTok eating... They had big jars of a

gelatinous substance. And they were taking, like a... like using a measuring spoon—

Justin: [noises of disgust]

Sydnee: ... to, like, take a tablespoon out of it. Which also, like, it's an unpleasant way to eat anything, no matter how it tastes.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Because a lot of tablespoons are kind of shaped... Like they're deep—

Justin: It's like a- Yeah.

Sydnee: So you can't just like...

Justin: Yeah, eating out of a tablespoon is not a pleasure.

Sydnee: You got to get your tongue in there, you know?

Justin: Yeah, it's not a pleasant experience.

Sydnee: And like, dig it out.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And so it's... I mean the whole thing is like... I mean it's not my thing to watch. [laughs]

Justin: It's fun if you're... If like... If you do it with peanut butter and you pretend you're a bear? That can be fun, to eat out of a tablespoon. But other than that, I can't think of many practical uses.

Sydnee: So, what they're eating— or what they hope they're eating, what they think they're eating- is a kind of sea moss, specifically chondrus crispus is the main, like kind...

That is the scientific name for the main type of sea moss that I think is credited with a lot of these nutritional health benefits.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And by the way, most of the TikToks that I found were talking about like, "This is good for your skin." And then the other health claims they were making were those vague like, "Health. Wellness. Balancing."

Justin: More energy.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Better digestion.

Sydnee: I mean, like, nothing very specific. Other than skin, like a lot of people think this is really good for your skin. But other than that, it was just sort of these vague kind of like, you know, like a lot of wellness claims. "Make you feel better."

Justin: Better. Generally better.

Sydnee: This is a specific species of red algae. The chondrus crispus. Now, there are other algae that you might actually be eating, and we'll get to that. But this is kind of where this—

Justin: Mixed in?

Sydnee: ... idea comes from.

Justin: Just sort of, snuck in there?

Sydnee: Well it de- The word sea moss or even like "Irish sea moss," which is where the purported health benefits really started, isn't necessarily the kind that grows in Ireland or from Ireland or in any way related to Ireland.

But the term "Irish sea moss" has kind of... Like people look for that as like "Ah, this is the stuff. The good stuff."

Justin: "This is the stuff I crave."

Sydnee: Even if it's not really that... It does grow along the coast of Ireland. It also grows on rocky coastlines in continental Europe and North America. So there's other places you can find this, okay?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So it is a... It looks... usually reddish, is what people connect it with. Red sea moss. Although it can be like other colors. It can be darker purple. There are some yellow-green varieties.

Justin: Sounds nice.

Sydnee: But the reddish stuff that grows along the Irish coast is what a lot of people associate with like... That is the good... the good moss. [laughs] That good, good moss.

Justin: That good moss.

Sydnee: Now in Japan this is known as "tsunomata", so if you've heard of that, in a supplement, because there are supplements that are marketed as the Japanese "tsunomata", it's the same thing.

Also, carrageenan moss, curly moss, gristle moss, pearly gristle moss, dorset weed, sea pearl moss. These are all things you may see marketed to you that are the same thing. Jelly moss.

These are all the same things, okay? There's—

Justin: Gross. Jelly moss is the worst sounding one so far, in case you're keeping score.

Sydnee: [laughs] There's also some red seaweeds that are native to the tropical regions of the world that are sometimes marketed as Irish sea moss that are obviously not.

There's a Jamaican drink called "Irish Sea Moss," which is a different but related algae-based...

Justin: This is like—

Sydnee: ... beverage.

Justin: Did I talk about Siberian ginseng when I was doing the gamer pills episode? It's called Siberian ginseng; it's listed in the ingredients of a lot of these things. It's not ginseng, it's like a special kind of... I dunno. It's a different sort of thing altogether. It's not even ginseng.

Sydnee: Well, and there are articles out there if you want to untangle all of this. I don't want to go into too much detail because I want to get into, what are the health stuff and are they real?

But there are articles written specifically to try to delineate sea moss from specifically Irish sea moss. From like, different kinds of red algae-type things like to sort of parse all this out.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Because it's all kind of getting used interchangeably. And to some extent it might not matter sometimes 'cause a lot of these algae might have similarities. But if you're looking for a specific type of moss you probably want to look into that.

Anyway. The main component is carrageenan. You may recognize that word because it's in a lot of stuff.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Because it's gelatinous. So it's in a lot of like, dairy products.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: It's in a lot of cosmetics. It's in a lot of medications. It's in infant formula. It's... it can make things... gelatinous. It gives things that texture.

Justin: Gross. Let's get rid of it. [laughs]

Sydnee: No, I mean, it's very useful.

Justin: Oh, right.

Sydnee: This is the primary use case of this sea moss.

Justin: I don't like that though. I don't like that texture though.

Sydnee: Because it... I don't know. Why did... Why do people start eating things that they see in the world?

Justin: I mean, because it was there.

Sydnee: I mean, that's a great question. It was there. It was there and it was pretty. And so at some point, especially along the Western Irish coast, people started eating it and trying to use it for things.

Justin: I don't think we, as a history, because a lot of their names are probably lost to history. I wish we were able to better lionize history's eaters that didn't make it.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Because there had to be someone who's like, "My thing for humanity is... I'm going to eat this."

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: "And if I beef it, everybody knows, please write it down in history books that we don't eat this. But that will be my contribution."

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: "And then that guy next to me, he can try the next thing, but that will be my contribution to like, the human condition, is that I know those kinds of berries will kill you."

Sydnee: Well, and some... some of it... I mean, that's how it works, right?

And it's also how we develop, like, tastes for things. It's why we prefer some tastes to others.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: It was an evolutionary adaptation because the things we don't like, the taste of sometimes it's because it's poisonous and that was why we developed that aversion to it. You know.

Justin: Makes sense.

Sydnee: Sea moss, for the record, as far as I can tell from people who have eaten actual sea moss—

Because there's so many supplements and gels and different forms to eat this in, and some of them are flavored like other things. Like I saw somebody eating a mango-flavored one.

So like I... What does that taste like? Well, I mean, it's going to taste like mango, I would assume.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But as far as I can tell, and I've not eaten sea moss, it would taste kind of like you would expect most things from the ocean to taste.

Justin: Salty.

Sydnee: Salty, savory, umami...

Justin: Ocean taste.

Sydnee: So, like not something that you would find unpleasant for a lot of us.

Justin: Enh.

Sydnee: Like I... I like that flavor. I appreciate that. I know that's not your bag.

Justin: It is not.

Sydnee: No, you don't... 'Cause you won't get sushi that's wrapped in seaweed.

Justin: Oh, it's the worst. I hate that. I hate it.

Sydnee: See, and I like it.

Justin: Yeah, but I hate it.

Sydnee: Well, but I like it.

Justin: Give me those soy wrappers. The pink soy wrappers?

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Aw. Now we're... Now see, my kinda... Let me tell you about my kind of sushi.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: You take soy wrapper. You got some rich. You got some fried shrimp—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Little bit of mango in there? Now we're having sushi. Maybe a little bit of jalapeno. That's a power roll.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: That's my joint, okay? That's sushi that we could all... I've been ordering the power roll so long at Taste of Asia, it's not on the menu anymore. I just pay for a roll that is the same price as the power roll used to be, and then I write, "Please make this power roll. It's not on the menu anymore." And they always hook me up.

Sydnee: They know you.

Justin: They know me.

Sydnee: They know you.

Justin: They keep the recipe just for me. They should call it the Justin Roll.

Sydnee: I... See, I've been expanding. I've switched it up recently and have actually started eating like real, raw fish.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: You know.

Justin: It was invented- Sushi was invented the same year I was.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Did you know that?

Sydnee: That you were invented?

Justin: [laughing] Yeah.

Sydnee: Is that what you'd like to say? You were invented?

Justin: They did one of those Tik Tok ads, it says sushi came out on my birthday. That does not sound right. That sushi came out in 1980—

Sydnee: I doubt—

Justin: ... alongside the release of Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: That is not true.

Justin: That is just what I'm—

Sydnee: Maybe popularized in the US or something?

Justin: It's... it's... Maybe, yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: I don't know what it meant exactly.

Sydnee: That is not... There's no way that's true. Okay, so they started— I love this idea. So, initially it was used as like a food source for your animals, which makes a lot of sense. “I think I want to eat this, but I'm going to feed it to this cow first [laughing] and see what happens.”

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And it was a good way to, like, supplement food for animals.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And then eventually people tried it themselves and would eat it, would add it to food. I'm sure it provided extra flavor. They also use it for other things. Like because it has this thickening ability like you put it in stuff and it'll make it thicker, they would use it to like thicken inks. They used it to stuff mattresses.

And eventually... medicine. Again, I feel like this is true for so many substances that we find multiple uses for, eventually somebody goes, “Well, maybe it's medicine too.” And so—

Justin: Yeah. I mean the flavor is definitely going to be part of that, right? We have a conditioning to think that things that taste bad can—

Sydnee: Well it doesn't—

Justin: ... can also be good for us, right? Or...

Sydnee: I don't think it tastes bad. Like, I haven't tasted it, but from the reports I don't think it does necessarily. I think it is a- I mean, I don't think that everybody likes umami.

Justin: Maybe strong flavor, then?

Sydnee: It's a strong— yes.

Justin: Strong flavor.

Sydnee: Strong flavor.

Justin: Right?

Sydnee: That's fair to say.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: That's fair to say. So and—

Justin: Because no, if it was completely unappetizing, some of our like poison... our poison biology would probably kick in. But... you know.

Sydnee: Sure, yeah. But from the 1800s, you can see advertisements of people who are, like, trying to sell it. [laughs]

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: As "Here is something that would be good for you" for a lot of like, you know, vigor, like energy. Feeling better. Like some non-specific stuff. But then specifically you start to see doctors in the 1800s prescribing a carrageenan jelly. So like a sea moss jelly, basically that has been made from the...

They've extracted the gelatinous properties from the sea moss and are telling you- or in a broth sometimes- to take it for all manner of things. Like do you have an ulcer? Do you have a sore throat? Do you have some sort of stomach problem?

Because it was like... mucousy? [laughs uncomfortably] Then people... gosh, I love the way people's minds work. The thought was that it probably soothed mucous membranes. It would soothe like your airways.

Justin: Sure. Like cures—

Sydnee: Where the mucus came from.

Justin: Like cures like. Like cures like.

Sydnee: Well, this is a—

Justin: Gross and mucousy...

Sydnee: I mean—

Justin: ... cures gross and mucousy.

Sydnee: So I did not find that, the doctrine of signatures, specifically referenced. And when I say, "the doctrine of signatures," that's what I'm talking about. The concept in medicine that is—

Justin: Like cures like.

Sydnee: ... not what we would think of in use in, you know, Western medicine today. But the idea that like cures like. So if you have the classic example, if you have a headache...

Justin: Eat cauliflower because it looks like a brain.

Sydnee: Well, sure. Or walnut is the... that's usually what they would recommend. Eat a walnut, because it looks like a brain, so it must be good for your head.

So, same idea, if you're coughing up mucus and you've got a lot of inflammation in your mucus membranes, eat this stuff that looks like mucus, and it will soothe those places.

Justin: [sarcastic] Of course, yes.

Sydnee: And so it was used a lot as like, the same way we would prescribe like cough syrups or things like that. Like, "Here. This is good for your

cough. This is good for, you know, your congestion. This will help clear out all that mucus, because it is like mucus.”

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: It makes you wonder if, when you think about like how many cough medicines, like over the counter cough medicines are syrupy, they're not just liquidy.

Justin: Mm. Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Like more and more today, they're just liquidy, but like they used to be like...

Justin: It was more like coating.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: It was like, you used to see that in a lot of the ads. You'd see the like silhouette of the human being. And then as the liquid went down, it would like, coat their esophagus in, I don't know, cooling, soothing medical relief.

Sydnee: So it was used a lot in these medical ways, like a lot of sort of folk medicine things were. Not necessarily because there were studies that showed it was working. I mean, nobody was studying it. You were just...

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: It was folk medicine. You handed down this information. Doctors at the time practiced folk medicine just like anybody else did, you know? I mean, yes, they were studying the human body, but a lot of this knowledge was just passed around person to person.

Specifically, sea moss became a really important source of nutrition during the Irish Famine.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: And so that is where you see a lot of people eating it more, is because it does— and we'll get into— it does have a lot of vitamins and minerals in it.

Which doesn't necessarily mean that if you have all foods open to you, you would use it to replace those foods.

But if you are in a situation where your food supply is being cut off and you're not able to access foods, because you're actively being starved, it would be a good alternative source.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Not enough, not enough, but a good alternative. So you do see that.

And then you kind of see the industry actually move because it becomes so synonymous with Ireland after a while, you see, as people immigrate to the US, they bring like sea moss farming along with them.

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: And so you see towns pop up across the US, where the Irish moss industry is becoming a real part of like, that town. And that's what they do there. There's a lot of Irish immigrants and they farm sea moss.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: And sell it.

This became... And again, while yes, there are these medicinal thoughts and these food uses, the main reason people are farming sea moss at this point is because of carrageenan.

So before we had that we would use isinglass, which is a substance that you get from fish, specifically from their swim bladders, to thicken things.

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: [laughs] And you could like—

Justin: I just—

Sydnee: ...you could thicken desserts.

Justin: Man, you think about these times with these guys just looking at a fish water like, "I don't like to eat this. There's got to be something. Can we rub it on something to see if it helps? There's gotta be something we can do with this!"

Sydnee: "What do we do with this stuff?"
"Well, we thicken desserts with it."

Justin: "Yeah! Great! I'm hungry."

Sydnee: "We'll use it for jelly."

Justin: "Who's hungry?"

Sydnee: "Use it for a pudding."

Justin: "Let's invent flan!"

Sydnee: [laughs] There are a lot of desserts that were made with this... with this fish...

Justin: Flan is not made with gelatin, but you get the idea.

Sydnee: No. But there were a lot of desserts that were made with this fish bladder substance. And then that was replaced in many cases by carrageenan because it's cheaper and easier to make.

Justin: Mm-hmm. Sounds kind of like gelatin, in usage. Like that, could—

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. It's very similar, very similar.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And I mean today it has largely replaced that. I'm not completely... there are still some uses for that and some desserts that are traditionally made using that substance from fish bladders.

Justin: I feel like I've heard... Yeah, I feel like I've heard of... Not the fish blad- I feel like I've heard of seaweed version of marshmallow.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: Like marshmallows and other things where you would typically have a gelatin application.

Sydnee: This is... Well and I think what you... If you are familiar with this concept, any kind of like algae or seaweed kind of thing is being used to thicken or like as a replacement for that in like modern vegan cuisine and that kind of thing.

Justin: Because we're talking about the physical characteristics of it, rather than the nutritional?

Sydnee: Exactly, exactly. And that is... That is where you're... You're seeing the roots of this here. So that's where that, this idea, starts.

And now, like, how many different things have we replaced in order to, if we are trying to follow a vegan diet...

Justin: Yeah, for sure.

Sydnee: ... you know, with this. So that we're not using fish bladder or some other animal product like gelatin. You know, we can use this instead.

Now that is the place where... And by the way, I should just say like today, before I get into all the purported health benefits, we still have... There's still chondrus crispus.

For a while this sort of commercial use and the widespread like, "Oh, this is great! We need to replace everything with this." It over-farmed the areas where it grew naturally.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: And there was a lot of trouble, like, one, trying to find methods to collect it. It was initially, of course, collected by hand.

And they created like these big rakes that would extend from boats and then you could, you know, troll along the areas where it grew and collect it with these rakes.

Even that wasn't keeping up and they were over-farming it. They started growing it in tanks, eventually.

And then you see the replacement of just this one species with other species of sea moss.

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: So it's not all necessarily like the chondrus crispus anymore. So there are other ones that they found were easier to grow in tanks. Like eucheuma is a... You'll see that on a package sometimes. And it's very similar properties but like, we can just grow those different places.

So there are other kinds of sea moss that also produce this carrageenan in other parts of the world. And so it's not all coming from the coast of Ireland anymore. And so they are able to like repop— They were able to repopulate that area with sea moss once more.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So, why are we talking about it in terms of health and wellness today, in the year 2024? Well, because of TikTok and I'm going to tell you what they're saying it can do and whether or not that's true... right after we go to the billing department.

Justin: Ah, let's go!

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Sydnee: We know that there is this history of it being used as a health food.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So it's not hard to imagine that when we have this sort of bias in our culture that if something is old, it must work [laughs].

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: That somebody has rediscovered, rebranded and repackaged sea moss and it has kind of caught the attention of, especially like wellness influencers. Who I have to imagine... This is just me sort of... I'm not basing this on knowing these people or what motivates them.

But I imagine. That part of your job, if you are a wellness influencer on the Internet, is you are going to have to try to keep finding new...

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: ... new products to tell people about.

Justin: Right. That's the churn of capitalism, baby.

Sydnee: One, to stay relevant, to get clicks. And then two, like that's how you get brand deals and stuff, right?

Justin: Yeah. Yeah. Then there's also referrals.

Sydnee: Like you try a product and you like it.

Justin: [crosstalk] Yeah.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: A lot of people make a, you know, referral fee, on selling stuff.

Sydnee: So there's always going to be an incentive to find and push new products, whether or not they work. And whether or not they're needed, this is a whole other question.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So sea moss is being promoted on TikTok by a variety of different people who are probably either selling it or connected to groups that are selling it. And then just by people who are like, seeing that, buying the product and then making videos about them trying it. They say that it can help with everything.

You know, weight loss, skin health, fertility, gut health. Everybody's trying to fix their gut health on TikTok. There's so many different influencers and products and conversations happening about gut health these days.

So there are lots of people talking about how it changed their life and a lot of them are getting it in the gel form. You can find it in powders and flakes. Dried, just like it looks like a clump of moss, if you prefer. It's sold in pills. If you just want a pill that you can take that has sea moss in it.

None of this stuff, by the way, is FDA regulated.

Justin: Oh, naturally.

Sydnee: None of this stuff... You can't... If you buy any of this, you don't know what you're buying for sure. You just... you don't.

It could be any of these different species of moss that I've told you about.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: You'd have to check for sure. If you're trying to get the original Irish sea moss, the chondrus crispus, you'd have to check.

And even then you don't really know what's in any of this stuff. So I should just preface with that. This is what they're saying they're selling you.

Justin: But it's a big jar of goop, so who knows?

Sydnee: It- Well, yeah. Dr. Sebi was a big fan of sea moss. Which, I don't think we've ever done an episode on Dr. Sebi.

Justin: The name does not ring a bell.

Sydnee: So a... an herbalist who promoted lots of different...

Justin: Interesting.

Sydnee: ... interesting... [laughs] concepts. Never had any medical training. Was arrested at one point for claiming he could cure AIDS.

Justin: Oh, wow!

Sydnee: And for practicing medicine without a license. And also was named Alfredo Bowman, not Dr. Sebi. So the point is that is probably... You see these sort of like figures in wellness and... complementary medicine...

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: ... history, who start an idea and then it- Like, they're building off this history. They try to take it in the modern day, and now we've got TikTokers talking about it.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: There is reason to believe that it's... And if we're saying, "good for you" and when you say like, "is something good for you?" Do you mean, does it have stuff that your body can use? If you mean that, well, yeah. It does. For sure. It has lots of stuff your body can use.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I don't know that you need a bunch of that stuff.

Justin: Bu it's—

Sydnee: I don't know what your body— I don't know you, but... [laughs]

Justin: But it's a low bar to clear, right? If it's got some fiber in it and there's plant materials in it, someone would assume. You can make that argument, right?

There's gotta be some vitamins in there, sure.

Sydnee: It's so tough and you can make the claim—

Justin: Is it tough or is it goopy, Syd?

Sydnee: Well— [laughs reluctantly]

Justin: That's... you need to decide on this right now.

Sydnee: It's goopy, but the claim “is something good for you” is so hard for me, because I don't think we should talk about good or bad when it comes to food generally.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: There are—

Justin: Because you can get enough of something, right?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: If I'm getting too much fiber, I dunno, I'm using that as an example. If I'm getting too much of something then more of it is not better, right?

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: It's not “good” for me. It could be neutral, maybe, but it's not necessarily good for me.

Sydnee: Well, and it's also good or... Good and bad are loaded words to use. The connotation there is that there's a moral property to food.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And there isn't, because you can... I mean if you... I think a lot of people would think of bad food, quote-unquote "bad food" as like fast food, right?

Like that would be... Like, if we could all just poll a bunch of people and say name a bad food, they might name hamburger.

Justin: Mm. Yeah.

Sydnee: Or pizza or something. Well, there are things in hamburgers and pizza that your body needs. And if that is your source of nutrition for a meal, I'm not gonna sit here and say that's a terrible lunch or dinner or whatever to have.

Justin: There are times... There are times when a hamburger is good for you. It would be good for you—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: ... through that nomenclature. Right?

Sydnee: Yes. And so—

Justin: That's why it's not helpful, is what I'm saying, right? Like—

Sydnee: It's not helpful bar—

Justin: It's not helpful.

Sydnee: And so you can apply it to anything.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So is it good for you? Sure. Yeah. It's got some stuff in it that, yes, your body does need.

Justin: If you haven't eaten in two days, a Twinkie would be like, absolutely rocking.

Sydnee: It would be good for you.

Justin: Right?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: It would be so good for you right now. [laughs]

Sydnee: I don't... It doesn't necessarily have like... I think there's this idea that there are foods that have qualities that all other foods don't have. And I don't... I don't really... I don't agree with that supposition.

Justin: We'll I was gonna say, and this is like such a recurrent theme on *Sawbones*, that I... maybe it doesn't bear repeating. But I don't know much about medicine and all, but I do have some experience with people looking for panaceas that will fix all the problems with your life.

And I can say, as somebody who has gone down so many of these like particular rabbit holes, the one thing missing from your life is not in a jar. There is not a one thing that if you just found the right powder or right goop or right shot or right any— Well, maybe shot. Once you get into medicine, yeah, I can think of a couple of medicines in my life that like, yeah, really did turn things around.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: But it's not... It's not like... It's not a nutritional supplement. Like it's probably not.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: It's probably a lot of... a lot of stuff.

Sydnee: Especially if we're talking about the vague concept of feeling good.

Justin: Right!

Sydnee: Because that's not a one... That's not a box you check. That's a whole idea.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: [laughing] And it changes minute to minute.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So...

Justin: You probably need more water. If you have to wash this stuff down with a big jug of water, it may be good for you just 'cause it's getting you to drink some more water.

Sydnee: Not everyone needs more water. There's a lot—

Justin: I need more!

Sydnee: See, this is a whole other conversation that we are—

Justin: Oh yeah, we need to talk about hydration.

Sydnee: The hydration industry has gone overboard.

But, like a lot of things that grow in the sea, sea moss absorbs stuff that's in the sea. And that includes a lot of minerals. So you get where this comes from.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: I mean, and it's the same thing. I think we have this, like, vague idea that seaweed is good for us, right?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: It's the same. I mean, we're— It's based on the same idea. It has a lot of different... it has potassium and vitamin A and C and K and magnesium and iron and calcium. And it's got fiber in it. It's... the caloric

content [laughs] of sea moss is debated in so many different articles. Because there are people who are like "It's calorie free!" And then there are other people who are like, "Bodybuilders love it because of its calories!"

As far as I could tell, the actual nutritional, like from the USDA, the nutritional content, of sea moss is five calories in two tablespoons. Do with that information what you will.

Justin: Yeah, it couldn't matter less, honestly.

Sydnee: No. But a lot of people were talking about it.

Justin: No one is the size they are because of sea moss consumption.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: I want to go out on a limb and say that right now.

Sydnee: It does... Now the one thing I didn't mention on that list and that is the focus of good and bad things. It does contain a lot of iodine.

And iodine is something that we do need. The majority of us get plenty in just our typical dietary intake. You may already know this, but salt in the United States is iodized.

I mean, certainly you can get salt that isn't. In West Virginia you can buy raw milk now, so you get lots of things, lots of places. Did you know that?

Justin: [sarcastic] Yeah, it's pretty—

Sydnee: Yeah? You can do that.

Justin: ... pretty exciting.

Sydnee: You can do that here now. Don't.

Justin: Yeah. Don't.

Sydnee: Please don't.

Justin: Why? Don't.

Sydnee: Don't do that.

Justin: Don't.

Sydnee: I'm sorry, Louis Pasteur. I'm sorry.

Justin: We did our best.

Sydnee: We didn't.

Justin: But now- We did our best.

Sydnee: Well, you and I did.

Justin: Well, like—

Sydnee: The legislature didn't.

Justin: Yeah...

Sydnee: Anyway, [laughs] we— most of us get plenty of iodine in our diet just from the typical sources. If you're just eating sort of a standard diet. Obviously, there are cases where people are not getting enough iodine and sea moss would—

Justin: You get a goiter? Right, is that right?

Sydnee: Yes, there are also cases where you can get too much iodine.

Justin: [sarcastic and nervous] Oh, good. Yeah, good.

Sydnee: Which is important to know—

Justin: [sarcastic] I needed something to be concerned about.

Sydnee: ... if you're considering ingesting a ton of sea moss, right? It contains iodine. This... I looked through all of the different health claims and then looked for the studies to support each one, so I wanted to go one by one.

First of all, immunity. It has a vague claim of quote "improving immunity." There are no studies I found for that. As far as I could tell, the idea is because it's like mucus. It's the same concept we're basing this on. It will soothe your mucous membranes, and those are where you protect yourself against bacteria and viruses.

Justin: [dismissively] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sydnee: So like, it's good for that?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So I think this is a remnant of "like cures like," "doctrine of signatures" type thinking.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: I couldn't find any studies. Weight loss. Everything, everything out there they'll tell you will make you lose weight.

Justin: Of course.

Sydnee: That's such an industry to itself. There are no studies. Again, I think the reason people might claim this is because it does have some fiber. So I guess if you ate a bunch, it might make you feel kind of full.

Justin: Mm. Maybe.

Sydnee: And so you would eat less.

Justin: I will say that—

Sydnee: There's no study on it. There's no study.

Justin: I will say that in my experience, is true of every substance. [laughs]

Sydnee: Yes. If you eat a bunch of one thing you're not gonna eat other things.

Justin: Yeah. You will be eventually full of that thing.

Sydnee: Um, heart—

Justin: Except, this is interesting, except Oreos, I have discovered. [laughs] There is not a fixed number at which my consumption systems will say "No, no, no. No more Oreos, no more for me, thank you."

Sydnee: And we actually... you... we... Didn't we talk about this recently? If you were in a food eating contest, what's the food you could eat the most of?

Justin: Yes, it's my favorite... It's my favorite conversation opener. It's a great icebreaker. If you never tried it, if a conversation's not going well, just ask the person, "Hey, what food do you think you could eat the most of?" [laughs]

Sydnee: If it were... I... my answer is always lo mein.

Justin: Yeah!

Sydnee: I really think... I really think I could eat lo mein without ever stopping if you needed me to.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I don't know why you'd need me to.

Justin: Like a lo mein—

Sydnee: Why would you need me to?

Justin: We're in a lo mein prison.

Sydnee: Yeah. [laughs]

Justin: And you gotta eat your way out? I love it.

Sydnee: I think I could just continue to eat... I might need like 5-minute breaks every now and then, but that would be about it.

Justin: I have never willingly put down Oreos. I—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: And it's always like... there's a part of me, my defense mechanisms have kicked in. And usually it's just... I'll take the package and throw it across the room, and I'll say, "Get these away from me!"

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: That's what I'll say. I'll say—

Sydnee: It's just like that.

Justin: ... "I'm so bad..."

Sydnee: Just like that.

Justin: "Get these away from me."

Sydnee: See, you're moralizing about food.

Justin: I'm not. Imma... friggin' eat some Oreos. Yo, life's hard.

Sydnee: Heart health. I found a lot of people say, "it's good for your heart." That's... Which I, again, that's such a vague... that means nothing.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: No studies. There were studies on other things that had some of the things that sea moss has in it.

Justin: Mm-hmm!?

Sydnee: And they showed some benefits. So they extrapolated from that, that also sea moss must be good for your heart health. There are no studies.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: [increasingly angry] On cancer prevention? No. No. No.

Justin: No. I mean, obviously.

Sydnee: Man, I get so mad when it starts... when they start talking about cancer.

Justin: They got to though. They gotta get there.

Sydnee: So they did a study where they took some... They extracted some stuff out of sea moss and they put it in a petri dish with some cancer cells. And some of those cancer cells stopped growing.

I couldn't find any replication of this study. I... it was a very small paper with a lot, not a lot of detail. I think they were more concerned with the methods they use to extract the substances from the sea moss. There was like an ultrasound involved. Anyway. No. No, this means not— No, this does not prove anything.

Gut health. There was a study done in rats that showed it improved gut health.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: That's all I could find. No human studies. And the authors of that study work for Acadian Sea— Not all of them, but a lot of them work for Acadian Sea Plants Limited, which sells sea moss.

There're... Anti-HPV. Now all of the studies that were done to look—

Justin: Now there's a vaccine for that!

Sydnee: Well, all the studies that I looked at that said, "Does it block human papilloma virus," which is the virus that can... There's a lot of different...

Justin: Makes the... It can make... It can make genital warts.

Sydnee: Genital warts is one strain. There's other strains that can cause cervical cancer. So the Gardasil vaccine, the HPV vaccine, Gardasil is the brand name, prevents the types of HPV that can cause cancer. Which is why it is a critical vaccine to get when you are eligible.

Please talk to your healthcare provider about the HPV vaccine. It's a great vaccine. All of these studies say, "This is just to compliment that."

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: "We're not saying..." Because the vaccine is better, the vaccine's better than this. Obviously.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: But they basically used some sort of proxy molecule to stand in for HPV itself in all these studies to see like, could it prevent HPV? So you would have to actually do studies with HPV... There's no studies.

Justin: So why—

Sydnee: There's no studies.

Justin: Okay. There's no studies.

Sydnee: There's no studies.

Justin: Alright.

Sydnee: I mean, there are studies, but not that prove this.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: There are studies that investigate this. There are studies that suggest the need for more studies. And skin. Skin was the biggest claim on TikTok that I found in my personal research. No studies to support this.

What I found is that it has sulfur in it, and sulfur is good for killing yeast and so this is good for your skin. This... I don't... I couldn't even make this work in my head. And also it has arginine.

Justin: [slowly] Arginine... Oh—!

Sydnee: Which we talked about on our last episode...

Justin: In the gamer pills?

Sydnee: Episode before last, in the gamer pills.

Justin: Arginine, that's one of the ones that there's supposed to be some... maybe...

Sydnee: But we talked about that.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: We talked about that. And by the way, one of our listeners reached out about the journal *Nutrients* specifically that we mentioned in the last...

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Did you see that email?

Justin: No.

Sydnee: *Nutrients* now has been put on like a watch list of journals that publish really questionable information and it's being... Its articles are being delisted by PubMed.

Justin: Oh. Okay.

Sydnee: So thank you for giving that information.

Justin: So I'm glad we got that episode recorded before I lost access to that valuable research.

Sydnee: To *Nutrients*. So that means nothing. So I have no... Basically, I have no evidence to tell you that it's good for any of these health conditions.

It contains some stuff that your body needs. I don't know that you need more of it, and you may be getting plenty of all these things from your typical diet. I don't think... No. You don't need a supplement of this.

Do you need some sort of specific vitamin supplement? Do you need iodine? That I can't tell you. I'm a podcaster.

Justin: [laughs hard]

Sydnee: And I don't know you personally. But you don't need this sea moss supplement. And it may be harmful because of that iodine that's in it. If you take a whole bunch of it, you could get too much iodine. If you have a thyroid condition already, I would not take this without discussing it with your healthcare provider.

Or just don't take it would be the other option, at all. It could cause problems with your thyroid if you have too much iodine. And then the only other thing that I found in terms of risk to this is that it does contain some fiber and so some people who took a bunch of it were like, "I feel kind of gassy and bloated and uncomfortable after I took a bunch of this."

So it could do that too. I don't see any benefit from taking a supplement of this.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: If this is part of your diet, if you're already eating sea moss? Great, no problem. But please don't go out and spend money and start taking a bunch of this. There's— And don't... And I saw a lot of people suffering to get this gelatinous substance down. I don't know if it was taste or texture or what.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I don't... There is no reason that you need to do that.

Justin: Okay. Well, what am I going to do with all this sea moss?

Sydnee: Did you, just in the time that we've been recording this, buy sea moss?

Justin: No, I... This doesn't sound good to me.

Sydnee: You looked at an ad, didn't you?

Justin: No, ma'am. Thank you so much for listening to our podcast, which is called *Sawbones*. Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. And thanks to you for listening.

We really appreciate you being here, and we hope you'll take a moment to tell a friend about *Sawbones* this week. "Hey, I have a podcast and you should hear about it!" And just tell everybody. Wouldn't that be nice? To wake up tomorrow and everyone listens to our podcast.

Sydnee: I would love that.

Justin: And I mean everyone. [laughs] That is going to do it for us for this week. Until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

Maximum Fun.

A work-owned network...

Of artists-owned shows...

Supported directly by you.