[00:00:00]

(ADVERTISEMENT)

Transition: Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

Promo: Bullseye with Jesse Thorn is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

Music: "Huddle Formation" from the album *Thunder*, *Lightning*, *Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. How many times have you roasted potatoes? Maybe 20, or 100, or more. Maybe you're gonna roast potatoes this Thanksgiving. Maybe you're gonna make some this weekend. I mean, what's better than roast potatoes? Look, the point is I don't know your life. I don't know how many times you've roasted potatoes, but I'm willing to bet that you haven't done it <u>nearly</u> as many times as J. Kenji López-Alt has.

And guess what? He found it. The best way to roast potatoes. I have made his recipe, and I can confirm it rules. Kenji López-Alt is a food writer and chef. He's the child of two scientists, and he approaches cooking with a methodical and careful approach. His recipes often perfect the staples—steak, potatoes, beans, eggs, mayo, mushroom soup. If you're a home cook, the odds are you have a recipe from Kenji by which you swear. In 2015, he compiled a bunch of his signature recipes into his award-winning book, *The Food Lab: Better Home Cooking Through Science*.

When I talked to Kenji López-Alt in 2022, he had just followed up *The Food Lab* with a very different kind of cookbook, *The Wok: Recipes and Techniques*. It's a straightforward enough title: it's a book about woks. But in its nearly 700 pages, you'll find not only recipes, but also a guide to acquainting yourself with, understanding, and eventually mastering one of the most versatile pans in the kitchen. I've been a huge fan of Kenji's work forever, so It's really a thrill to have him on *Bullseye*.

Let's get right into it.

Transition: Playful, brassy synth.

Jesse Thorn: Kenji López-Alt, welcome to *Bullseye*. I'm so happy to have you on the show.

J. Kenji López-Alt: Thanks. I'm happy to be here.

Jesse Thorn: I feel like I've been scheming this one out for years now.

(Kenji "uh-oh"s with a laugh.)

I'm glad we're making it happen. Your new book is about woks. I think everybody has some idea of what a wok is. But like, what are the distinct qualities of a wok that make it different from another pan with sloped sides?

J. Kenji López-Alt: Well, you mean like on a physical level? Just like—?

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, like what is it, and why is it special? Is the question.

J. Kenji López-Alt: (*Laughs.*) Well, part of it is its thickness. You know. So, compared to like a western skillet, which—you know, these days you probably have like a three-ply skillet with like stainless and aluminum core. It takes a while to pre-heat and they're kind of designed to have a very even heat across their surface. Whereas a wok is generally much thinner—you know, a couple millimeters thick—and it'll be made of a material—you know, carbon steel is the most common material for a wok and it's what I would recommend for a wok. A material that's actually not that conductive to heat, so you actually develop distinct hot and cool zones in the wok, which is actually what you want.

So, you want like a really hot zone at the bottom for searing and stir frying. You want slightly cooler areas around the sides. But you know, the real important thing is that it has these really wide, shallowly sloped sides, which make it much easier to toss large amounts of food. It also makes it very easy to toss foods up and over the side of the wok, particularly over the back of the wok where it ends up going into this kind of column of hot air and steam that actually cooks the food faster. And it's also essential for getting—you know, some dishes where you want what's called the wok hei, the sort of smoky wok flavor. You can't really do that in a western skillet, mainly because you can't toss food properly.

But it also makes it useful for a lot of other things. So, for example, deep frying is really easy in a wok, because you have these wide, sloped sides so that—you know, in a western pot—like, say you deep fry in a Dutch oven, which is what—you know, like *Cook's Illustrated*, something like that would recommend. Something that people have at home; it's really nice and heavy. It has a large volume. The problem with the Dutch oven is that the sides are really straight. So, if you put too many things inside it and you start to fry things and you accidentally have a boil over and you see foam starting to rise in it, bubbles starting to rise, there's not much room for those bubbles to expand. And so, the only way they can really go is up and over.

Whereas, on a wok, you very rapidly increase the surface area as you go up in height. So, when you start—you can fill up a wok halfway. You can put in a lot of food, deep fry it. And when the bubbles start to come up, they very easily dissipate, because they have all that room to spread out.

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It also gives you a lot more room to work in, so you can kind of slide a metal spider underneath, move things around. It makes things a lot easier to work with. The other—you know, other great things about a wok, you can steam in them very easily. So, if you have a bamboo steamer, like the kind where—you know, if you go to like a soup dumpling shop and they bring you those bamboo steamers, those will fit into virtually any size wok. Because

what happens is the—you know, if you have a 14-inch wok, a 16-inch wok, it doesn't really matter. Because the round bottom fits into the round side of the wok, because the sides are flared. So, you can steam in any size steaming basket in a wok, which you can't do with a western—you know, a straight-sided saucepan or Dutch oven.

Jesse Thorn: So, your mom is—or was, forgive me for not knowing—Japanese, and did some wok cooking at home when you were a kid, but I don't get the impression that it was a big part of your childhood food.

J. Kenji López-Alt: Well, so my mom is Japanese. Still is Japanese. Yeah. You know, she came to the US when she was a late teenager. And all of her kids were born in the US, me and my two sisters. And we lived with her and my Japanese grandparents in New York. And so, she did a mix of Japanese food, some of which was cooked in a wok. So, Japanese style mapo tofu, that was like our favorite dish and still is one of my favorite dishes. There's a recipe for that in the book. But Japanese style mapo tofu; she would deep fry things in her wok—so, tempura, deep fried dumplings, things like that. But she also did a lot of sort of, you know, Betty Crocker, *New York Times* recipes, things—you know. Very—she tried hard to give us a taste of America also, growing up.

You know, the person who was actually much more into wok cooking was my dad. So, my dad loved Chinese American food, particularly. You know. So, we spent a lot of our time in New York going and exploring Chinatown. And then—you know, and then also in Boston. You know, my dad—I was born in Boston. My dad moved back there when I was 12. And so, we spent a lot of time in Boston's Chinatown, as well. And there's a distinction between sort of, you know—New York style Chinese restaurants, at least in the '80s and '90s, which were mostly Cantonese. And Boston, which was a lot more Szechwan. But yeah, my dad was the one who was obsessed with Chinese and Chinese American food. And so, he actually did a lot of wok cooking and still does.

So, that was really my introduction. You know, that and—(chuckles) and I also was a huge fan of infomercials. And so, I don't know if you remember wok commercials from the '80s, but there was an infomercial series called The Great Wok of China, and that's where I learned like—you know, they had footage of people hand hammering woks and they had someone making terrible, terrible food in it. But it was basically my introduction to how woks are made and what are the qualities of it. You know, surprisingly, the qualities that they list and explain why their wok was so good are actually, you know, reasonable standards for woks even today, similar to what I recommend in my book. Although, the type of food they were cooking was not anything I would recommend.

But you know, I watched a lot of—I watched a lot of infomercials. I watched a lot of *Yan Can Cook*. Um.

Jesse Thorn: (*Chuckling.*) I was about to say, I'm from San Francisco, and I'm pretty sure *Yan Can Cook* and Martin Yan were a production of the local PBS station, KQED. And so—

(Kenji confirms.)

Yeah, so—

J. Kenji López-Alt: Well, he—I mean, we got him—we got him on PBS, in New York. So. (*Chuckles.*)

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Clip:

(The audience applauds.)

Martin Yan (Yan Can Cook): Today, let us consider the oldest argument in the world. What came first: the chicken or the eggs? The answer is: huh? Who cares?!

(The audience chuckles.)

As long as there's chicken in every wok, I am happy. You are happy. Some people prefer food for thoughts, and I prefer thoughts on food!

Transition: A whooshing sound.

Jesse Thorn: Yeah, so that show was all over public television. And I lived in a real public television house. So, there was a lot of *Yan Cook*.

(They laugh.)

So, let's talk a little bit more about wok cooking before we get into your biography. And I also wanna run you through a few of your greatest hits. But why did you decide that wok cooking specifically was so much more than a chapter in *The Food Lab*, your first book?

J. Kenji López-Alt: Well, it's actually 'cause I—you know, I started writing the second book. And it was kind of this—you know, it was a lot of stuff that got cut out of the first book. 'Cause we ended up making the first book really focused on American cuisine and sort of American-adjacent cuisine. And so, the wok chapter ended up getting cut from that along with some other chapters. And so, when I started writing the second book, I had this kind of—you know, hodgepodge of different techniques and different tools. And you know, I didn't really know where to start. And so, I just started writing the wok chapter. And I got through—just like partway through stir fries and I was like 200 pages in. And like, a chapter in book—you know, at least in that first book, a chapter was about 100 pages or so.

So, I was already like 200 pages in, and I had really only written about sort of the science of stir fries and technique and nothing else you can do in a wok. And so, I called up my editor and I was like, "Look, let's—I got a lot to say about woks. Like, why don't we just write the wok book instead?" Because you know, it seemed to me sort of perfect at the time, because—you know, it's an ideal home cooking vessel. Right? It's a—it's a tool you can buy for like 40 bucks and you can cook for a family of four in it every night and do different techniques and cook all kinds of different things in it.

Jesse Thorn: We've got more to get into with J. Kenji López-Alt after a quick break. We'll be back in a minute. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Transition: Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

Jesse Thorn: I'm Jesse Thorn. You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm talking with food writer and chef J. Kenji López-Alt.

Do you have a favorite food to introduce people to cooking on a wok?

J. Kenji López-Alt: So, I mean, I do—I definitely have favorite foods that I, myself, like to cook in a wok. You know, the issue with the foods that I love is that a lot of them tend to be really spicy. And so, I don't know if it works for everybody, but if people are into spice—you know—I think one of the easiest and most impressive things you can cook in a wok is like real Szechwan style mapo tofu. It's my favorite dish in the world. But it's very, very fast and easy. It doesn't require any of the really sort of more complex stir frying techniques, 'cause you don't really—you know, mapo tofu, so you start by—you know, you make a chili oil, which is impressive to do because you get your chilis and your spices and stuff and then you pour hot oil over them. And you can do that in front of people, and it sizzles and—you know, it's like when you walk the fajitas through the room at the restaurant. You know? It has this like big plume of aromatic smoke that comes up and people are like, "Ooh."

You make this chili oil, which is simple to do but looks impressive. And then the stir fry itself is really basic. It's—you know, you make an infused oil with Szechwan peppercorns and chilis. You stir fry a little bit of ground meat. It can be beef or pork or—you know, I have a vegan version as well, which uses mushrooms, or you can use something like Impossible or Beyond if you wanna keep it vegan. And then you add your sauces in. And then you just add tofu and kind of toss it. So, there's no like—you know, there's none of that like heavy duty stir frying where you have to have an entire wok full of stuff that you're trying to toss through the back and get the flame to leap into it. You know, those sort of more advanced stir fry techniques.

So, it's very simple, but it's like super flavor-packed and it comes together in—you know—literally like five minutes. So, it's a dish that I cook at home, and it's my daughter's favorite dish. And it's like one of those things where it's like if I know my daughter's having a picky food day—which she does, sometimes—it's like I know she's gonna eat this.

Jesse Thorn: Now, you're famous for having—you know—sat in a room at *Cook's Illustrated* or *Serious Eats* or whatever, surrounded by 20,000 hardboiled eggs that you hardboiled in very slightly different ways in the most extraordinarily exhaustive hardboiled egg testing system ever devised. I think you did that for *The New York Times*.

(Kenji chuckles.)

But how do you develop enough recipes to fill—I'm looking at my copy of the book is about 625 pages, it looks like.

J. Kenji López-Alt: Yeah, something like that.

Jesse Thorn: So, how do you develop enough recipes? Look, there's a lot of techniques in the book. This isn't a recipe book per se, but how do you develop all that when your inclination is to do all your recipe developing carefully, bordering on compulsively?

J. Kenji López-Alt: (*Laughs.*) Well, I mean, I think you said it—where it's really—you know, the recipes are all sort of derived from the techniques. You know? So, it's like if I'm doing a recipe for—you know, whether it's like beef and broccoli, right? You know? Or like a stir fried beef with ginger and basil. You know, so the relevant questions there are, okay, like how do I—what am I gonna do to my meat to get the right texture in it? Alright, like one thing I've seen people recommend is washing the meat. Right? You put it in water. You massage it with your fingers. You change out the water a couple times and you wash the meat.

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Like, what does that washing do?

And that's a technique that's going to apply to virtually every beef recipe in the book. Right? And then it turns out it also—you know, I tested it with beef. I've tested it with pork. I tested it with chicken, and it turns out, okay, washing actually does have a—make a noticeable difference with all of these meats, both in terms of how well marinades penetrate and also how tender and juicy they become. So, really, the thing that I need to do a lot of testing on is washing. Right? And once I've done that, there's not that much difference between beef and broccoli and beef with ginger and basil other than sort of the ingredients. Right? Like, the base techniques and the sort of science and the things that I'm really interested in answering is the same.

So, you know, writing a book in this way—it's the same as how I think about cooking, where it's like I don't think about cooking as a series of individual recipes. I think about it as a series of individual techniques and procedures that I can then riff on and apply to different recipes. You know. So—and I think most cooks—you know, either experienced home cooks or restaurant chefs will tell you similar things, where—you know, you don't often cook from exact recipes. You have a sort of set of techniques under your belt and you know what parts of a recipe you can modify, what things you can add together and it's not going to fundamentally change sort of the way things work. You know?

Jesse Thorn: So, at *Cook's Illustrated*, there is a kind of way of doing things, which is its America's test kitchen and it's coming up with the best recipe, right? These are the—this is the brand.

(Kenji confirms with a chuckle.)

And that means a fair amount of testing of different techniques, different ingredients, and so on and so forth—usually in the pursuit of a kind of platonic ideal of a classic, American food. What was something that you worked on when you were working at the *Cook's Illustrated* multimedia conglomerate that you were particularly proud of, in refining something that—you know, that people might not think of beyond the—whatever it says in the Betty Crocker cookbook?

J. Kenji López-Alt: Yeah. Well, I think the—you know, the first one that comes to mind is the reverse sear steak, which was actually the first recipe I did for them in 2000—

Jesse Thorn: Wow, seriously!?

J. Kenji López-Alt: Yeah, that was like in—I started working there in 2007, I think?

Jesse Thorn: (*Laughs.*) That's like Will Clark hitting a homerun of Nolan Ryan in his first at bat.

(They laugh.)

J. Kenji López-Alt: But yeah! No, that was a—that was a recipe, a technique that came through just lots of testing. You know? Initially it was like, "Alright, like we haven't had a steak story in a while. Like, see what you can do with steak." And so, I started just by—you know—testing all the traditional techniques. And you know, I've been cooking steaks in restaurants for a long time. And the way you do it in a restaurant is like, yeah, you sear it hot in the skillet, you finish it in a really hot oven, you take it out, you let it rest, you slice it, you serve it.

And you know. And then that's when it sort of dawned on me that like—you know, restaurant techniques are designed for restaurants, and one of the goals in a restaurant is to get the food out fast and consistent. Right? Which is not how home cooks cook. Like, people at home—it's like they don't need the steak on the table within 15 minutes after someone ordered it. They need the steak on the table at six o'clock. So, at home it's like they're—they have as much time as they want. You know, obviously not as much time as they want, but it's not like you're under the strict time constraints that a restaurant service has.

And it was also at the time that sous vide had just started being used in restaurants. You know? Like the early 2000s was—you know, my last restaurant job was the first job where we had sous vide machines, and we were like one of the first three restaurants in Boston to have it.

Jesse Thorn: Sous vide machines are machines that maintain the temperature of a water bath to cook things at a <u>really</u> consistent temperature, often over a long period of time. Not always.

J. Kenji López-Alt: Correct. And so—you know, and so they were really exciting. You know, back then the machines were \$1,500-2,000, so only restaurants had them. And they were special—you know, they were repurposed lab equipment. They weren't made for

cooking, yet. These days, you can buy one for—I think like Instant Pot makes one for like 70 bucks or something. You know. So, you can buy—there's really easy access to them, now. But back then, it wasn't.

And so, one of the things we did with sous vide was we would precook steak or chicken or whatever it is. At the time it was mainly chicken at the restaurant I worked at, at least. You'd precook it at a low temperature, and that way, you know, you guarantee that it's cooked evenly all the way through. So, the idea was like, okay, like how can we sort of mimic this sous vide cooking at home. Yeah, and so, that's what we ended up with: this technique where you started at a very low temperature oven, which is different from a water bath, but it ends up actually working even better I think than a sous vide steak does. 'Cause you end up with a dry exterior. So, you start in a low temperature oven and then you finish it by searing it.

At the time, it did not—it did not have the name "reverse sear". Someone came up with that on the internet like years later. From—you know, if you go to AmazingRib.com, Meathead Goldwyn's site, he has this whole history of the reverse sear. And it turns out there was like some barbeque chef, Chris Finney I think, who was doing a similar technique before we published it.

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But for all intents and purposes, I think like he or I or somewhere around that time was when that technique was first used. And I think *Cook's Illustrated* certainly, you know, popularized it. And now it's just everywhere, which is really pretty cool to me to see, that like this technique that did not exist, now exists everywhere. So, yeah. That—I think that's the recipe that I have that had sort of like the most wide—at least at *Cook's Illustrated*—the most wide-reaching influence to today.

Jesse Thorn: We'll finish up with Kenji López-Alt in just a minute. When we come back from a short break, I will talk to him about how he balances inclusivity and appropriation when making recipes from cultures other than his own. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

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Promo:

(Sci-fi beeping.)

Music: Cheerful synth.

Ben Harrison: Hey, do you have a favorite episode of *Star Trek*?

Adam Pranica: If you do, you should also have a favorite *Star Trek* podcast.

Ben: *Greatest Trek* is about all the new streaming *Star Trek* shows, and it's a great companion to *The Greatest Generation*—our hit show about back catalog *Star Trek* that you grew up with.

Adam: It's a comedy podcast by two folks who used to be video producers. So, it's a serious mix of comedy and insight that fits right into the Maximum Fun network of shows.

Ben: And *Greatest Trek* is one of the most popular *Star Trek* podcasts in the world.

Adam: So, if you're following *Lower Decks*, *Prodigy*, or *Strange New Worlds*, come hang out with us every Friday as we roast and review favorite *Star Trek* shows.

Ben: It's on MaximumFun.org, YouTube, or your podcatching app.

(Sci-fi beep.)

Transition: Thumpy synth with a syncopated beat.

Jesse Thorn: It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with writer J. Kenji López-Alt of *Serious Eats* and the *New York Times*.

So, Kenji, like a lot of Americans, you are from a hybrid cultural background. You have Mom, who's a Japanese immigrant who came to the United States as a teenager. Your dad is from Pennsylvania. And you know, in a lot of your cooking, you focused on—in your first book, focused on quote/unquote "American" food, right? Which means all of these kind of cultural hybrid foods. Like cheeseburgers or whatever. Right?

(Kenji confirms.)

Now, you are cooking the foods of the parts of the world that use the wok. You know. There are plenty of Americans for whom that is their kind of native way of cooking. There are plenty who are not. How do you think about the interplay between authenticity, interculturality, and—you know—appropriation and innovation when you're working on something like this where—you know, where the stakes are higher than when you're working on a cheeseburger recipe?

J. Kenji López-Alt: Right, right. I mean, that's a very good question—one that I, you know—I had to think about a lot as I was writing. I think—you know, so first of all, the way I approach the recipes in this book is that virtually all of them are something that I either have a—you know, a dish that I have a personal connection to. You know, and I explain what the connection is—either something I grew up eating or something that I've—you know, I've found through traveling, and I've really enjoyed. You know. And as I mentioned, like when I was a kid—you know, my dad was super into Chinese American food, and so we spent a lot

of time going through Chinatown in New York and Boston. That was sort of—the food of my childhood was Chinese American food.

And so, a lot of the recipes in the book are these Chinese American things or they're dishes that are inspired by, you know, the Joyce Chen cookbook, which is like one of the early Chinese American cookbooks that my parents cooked out of Joyce Chen was a Chinese American immigrant who opened a restaurant in Boston, in Cambridge. She was the first woman television chef of color. She invented like polypropylene cutting boards. She invented number systems on Chinese menus. Like, she invented bottled stir fry sauce. Like, she's just like this amazing Chinese American entrepreneur chef who had this cookbook. And my mom used to cook this dish called Chungking pork out of it. And in that cookbook, she partnered with a doctor. And so, a lot—and at the time—you know, it came out in the '60s and there was a lot of sort of health-conscious cooking, then.

And so, a lot of the sort of traditional Chinese recipes were adapted. So, every recipe calls for like lean pork loin. You know? And all these things. So, my mom used to make that dish, and it was always really dry. You know. It's actually—the dish that you might be familiar with is Szechwan double cooked pork.

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Which is where you take pork belly, you boil it briefly, then you slice it, and you stir fry it. And it's this kind of rich, fatty dish. Right? And so, this ended up being this other dish in Joyce Chen's book that my mom then also further—came out with this really dry pork, 'cause you boil a pork loin, and then you stir fry it. And so, it was only like when I was writing this book that like I realized, "Oh, like this dish that my mom used to make is actually this Szechwan dish that I became familiar with—you know—living in Boston and going to Szechwan restaurants.

So, you know. And so, I try to make these types of connections in my book and talk about how these dishes relate to me, as a person. I think—you know, the other important thing for me in this book much more than in my first book, was doing a lot of sort of—you know, more typical journalism. You know, reaching out to other chefs, other cookbook writers, interviewing people, giving as much credit as I can for ideas that aren't originally mine, trying to tell people where they can find better resources. You know, because if authentic Chinese or authentic Thai or authentic Filipino cooking or authentic Japanese cooking is your goal, this is not the book for you. Right? This is not in any way meant to represent any of these cultures from a personal or a technique perspective. This is really the way I cook with a wok, and it's based on all these things that I grew up with and all these things I've learned through the years having, you know, cooked with woks for a large chunk of my life.

So, you know, I think with any issue of sort of—you know, appropriation and approaching other cultures and borrowing ideas from them, you—I think your responsibility as a writer is to, you know, give credit and explain. You know, don't take credit for ideas that aren't yours, and make sure that you're coming at everything from a sort of as personal a perspective as you can. So, you know. There's a very extensive bibliography in this book, and throughout the book there are recommendations for places you should go if you want to learn more about

specifics of certain regional cuisines or certain ethnic cuisines—cuisines from certain ethnicities that I'm, you know, not intimately familiar with.

Jesse Thorn: Kenji López-Alt, I'm so grateful to you for coming on the show. I so admire and appreciate your work, which has made my life a lot better. And I hope you'll come back again sometime soon, because there's 20,000 more things I'd love to talk to you about.

J. Kenji López-Alt: Yes, anytime.

Transition: Relaxed, chiming synth.

Jesse Thorn: J. Kenji López-Alt from 2022. His book is called *The Wok: Recipes and Techniques*. I recommend buying that book and maybe buying yourself a wok. We'll have a link to some of my favorite recipes of his also on our website, the *Bullseye* page at <u>MaximumFun.org</u>.

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun—as well as at Maximum Fun headquarters, overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. As we record this, it is Halloween. I am about to head out and trick or treat with my kids in Highland Park, Los Angeles, and I am dressed as a cowboy.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Daniel Huecias. Our video editor is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at DJWSounds.bandcamp.com. Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. It's called "Huddle Formation". Thanks to The Go! Team; thanks to their label, Memphis Industries.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube where there is video from so many of our interviews. So, go there and smash those like and subscribe buttons, share a clip, share a whole interview. Have fun. It's a new project for us. We're really enjoying it. We hope you do too. Search for *Bullseye* with Jesse Thorn. I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

Promo: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of <u>MaximumFun.org</u> and is distributed by NPR.

(Music fades out.)

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