

WHAT DO I KNOW ABOUT FOOD?

It's 5:30am and I'm hunched over a burning hot *imu* pit, an underground steamer being prepped to hold a 250-pound pig. Two Hawaiian workers, the size of sumo wrestlers, are stoking hot lava rocks in preparation for a big *luau*, just as their ancestors have done for generations. The sun is just rising over the Pacific, soft flicks of morning light dance over the water. I can taste the salt coming in with the ocean breeze. I breathe deeply, suspecting that this will be my only moment of peace in paradise. Breaking my reverie, one of the burly men taps my shoulder and says, "It's time."

My blood pressure starts to rise and my jaw clenches as I scan the area anxiously wondering, "Where the hell is everyone?" Just at that moment, the production truck sputters into the parking lot with my crew in tow. They know they are late and they know I won't be happy. They burst out of the van filled with excuses, coffee cups in hand.

"Listen. 5:30 means 5:30—not 6:00! You've already missed the lava rocks going in and now they need to lay down the *ti* leaves. The whole point of coming to Hawaii was to capture this *luau*. You think this is supposed to be a vacation?" I shriek.

As my shamed Keystone Cop-crew scrambles with their cases and cables trying to set up to videotape this process, I realize that for all the fun I'm having, I might as well be in Newark.

It sure sounds glamorous from the outside looking in: an all-expenses-paid trip to Hawaii with America's most popular chef, eating and cooking our way across the islands. But here's the catch—and there's always a catch—I have to shoot three broadcast hours of mouth-watering, hunger-provoking food porn on three different islands at fifteen locations in six days. And just to make matters worse, both my crew and my star

resent that we're here in Hawaii and I am actually making them work.

There have been days like this. There have been many. And there have been some good ones too. After all, it's the good days that sustain me. I've been a television producer my entire career. I've seen actors I've admired behave as if they were reliving their terrible twos. I've nearly had a live show shut down by a bribe-seeking union foreman. I've run up Sixth Avenue in the middle of gridlocked traffic from 14th Street to 34th Street, the final show master in my hand, with only four minutes left before it's supposed to hit the air. The stress and chaos are the only things consistent about the work I do. The rush comes from being assigned an impossible task and making it possible.

That was all before the Food Network called. They want me to be the executive producer for a hot new chef out of New Orleans. His name is Emeril Lagasse. I think to myself, "What the hell—cooking has got to be better than this. I'll give it a shot for six months."

Those six months turned into thirteen years and over 1500 hours of food television. Eyewitness to the scrappy early days of the fledgling TV Food Network, I was one of the many that worked on the transformation of cooking shows from sleepy on-air instructional manuals to glitzy must-watch TV. And during that time, I came to understand why the food we eat is so much more than just something to fuel our bodies. It's about love and comfort and pleasure.

Whether it's scrounging the farmer's market for the sweetest heirloom tomatoes with just the right amount of acidity or learning how to cook *à la minute*, almost everything I know about food, I learned from TV. I've had the pleasure—and sometimes trauma—of witnessing some of the country's top chefs in action from a front row seat. It has made for some vivid storytelling at parties (and perversely made me a popular

guest). Some of these culinary stars may not remember me, but I remember them. I remember their precise insight into the perfect ingredients, their ability to share their passion to the point of contagion, and most importantly, their generosity of spirit—give or take an egomaniacal tantrum or two. All of them in their own way have taught me not only how to cook, but how to cook with love and enthusiasm.

But as much as they may have influenced my personal culinary techniques, I have to give credit to the family and friends early in my life who truly inspired my zeal for food. From learning how to make my Nana's apple pie to realizing there's no point in ever making my mother's Lipton Onion Soup semi-homemade glazed brisket, most of my strongest memories have food as my co-star. It has shaped me, in more ways than one.

My home today has two kitchens. No, not one for milk and one for meat like some of my ancestors, but one for sweets and one for savory foods. I have a thermostat controlled wine cooler, and a culinary library of over 500 books. My next-door neighbor and I have been trying to perfect all five mother sauces by cross-referencing my copy of Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* with his copy of The Culinary Institute of America's *The Professional Chef*. We're up to velouté. The tomato and *espagnole* were big hits, but we still have to conquer *hollandaise* and *béchamel*. My husband and I have gotten so much praise for our own cooking that we are no longer invited to our friends' dinner parties for their fear of disappointing us. (*My specialty is grilled white pizza with a melange of mushrooms, shallots, garlic and pancetta beneath a bed of taleggio cheese finished with a drizzle of truffle oil.*) When I go into a restaurant "announced" the red carpet is rolled out and I roll out with a sated smile, extended stomach, and Tums standing by in my purse. It's been a long journey from a childhood sponsored by Kraft and Mrs. Paul's to three-star Michelin dinners. I can honestly say I've lived a good life very much thanks to food. If only I could dig an *imu*

pit in Brooklyn, I could die a happy woman.

My culinary awakening is forever entangled with the evolution of food television becoming our national comfort pastime. I like to think we grew up together, learning from our mistakes and trying to push the boundaries of how we think about food and cooking. At times my story might seem a little half-baked, sometimes a bit overdone, but at its heart, it's one deep dish of a delicious journey.

—Excerpted from *GETTING SAUCED—How I Learned Everything I Know About Food from TV*