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Talking **Food & Family**
With *Top Chef* Judge
Gail Simmons

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Gail FORCE

Between 12 Seasons As A “Top Chef” Judge
& A Delightful Baby At Home, NYC Mom
Gail Simmons Is Savoring Her Sweet Life

By Mia Weber

It may be difficult to remember a time on the Bravo network before Andy Cohen reigned supreme and every city had a clique of Real Housewives, but Gail Simmons—a judge on “Top Chef” since its debut in 2006—remembers that simpler time well. “We were the OGs of Bravo,” she recalls with a laugh over coffee at the West Village restaurant Buvette. “‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’ was really the moment that changed Bravo, and everything that came after fell into one of the five categories that one of those guys represented...the first major show after that was ‘Project Runway,’ and then they took the exact concept for ‘Project Runway’ and turned it into a food show, and that was ‘Top Chef.’”

For those keeping score—and familiar with the finer points of Bravo’s lineup over the past 10 years—“Top Chef” has since outlasted its predecessors (“Queer Eye” is off the air and “Runway” has migrated to Lifetime). And while much has changed for the Emmy-winning reality competition in the near-decade since Simmons

first took a seat at the judges’ table, its quality, popularity, and core group of judges certainly haven’t. In fact, the show has spawned numerous spinoffs—including “Top Chef Masters,” “Top Chef Duels,” and “Top Chef: Just Desserts”—to all of which Simmons, who represents *Food & Wine* magazine as their special projects director, has proudly lent her expertise as a critic and host.

And lest you think Simmons’ life is all tasting gourmet meals and traveling the world, you may want to glance at the rest of the impressive resume she’s been building while the cameras are off. For starters, the 38-year-old Canadian-native wrote a book, *Talking With My Mouth Full: My Life As A Professional Eater*, in 2012; she shot a new food TV project, “The Feed,” for the FYI network last year; and, over the past four years, she and her husband, Jeremy Abrams, bought and renovated a house in Brooklyn, which they moved into in December 2013.

Oh, and did we mention she had a baby, now-1-year-old Dahlia, last year?

"Top Chef's" Gail Simmons shops Pure Leaf Iced Tea's indoor Farmers Market at the New York Botanical Garden in October 2014.



Photo by Wenck Brothers

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Simmons, who's a McGill graduate with professional culinary training, would be the first to tell you that, as a busy city parent, there's no special celebrity secret to juggling motherhood and her professional passions.

"I'm still learning! Everyone looks at celebrities and people in the media, and sometimes the media makes it look as if we've all got it down so easy-breezy, and we can afford help and we can afford to make parenting look like it's no big deal, but it's a big deal! It's hard," she says. "But going to get my daughter in the morning and have her smile up at me, and have her say her first word, and take her first steps—those are worth all the craziness. It's at once harder and better than I ever thought."

As she continues to relish the joys and challenges of motherhood, alongside her ever-evolving role in the television, culinary, and editorial realms, it seems that her most effective tool for keeping the facets of her life in harmony is gratitude—it's clear that she loves what she does, the people she does it with, and the serendipitous journey that's brought her here.

"Top Chef" is in its twelfth season—when you started filming in 2005, did you have any inkling that it would become the long-running success it is now?

Not in the least! I got on the show really by happenstance. I had been working for *Food & Wine* magazine for about a year and part of my job was to do on-camera work for the magazine, but in a very small way... Bravo came to *Food & Wine* and said: "We want to do a show about chefs, but really professional chefs at the highest level, and we want to showcase the talent in the culinary world in a competition—will you help us? Teach us about the culinary world, be our partners on the show, and, if we like one of your editors, we'll put them on-camera to represent the magazine at the judges' table!" And this wasn't a format that everyone knew already—like now, when you say "judges' table," when you say "food competition," there are thousands of them. At the time, when *Food & Wine* said: "We want you to go do a screen test to be on this reality cooking competition," I was horrified! The only thing I knew about reality television was "Survivor" and "Fear Factor"—and while they were very successful, they weren't shows that I thought in a million years I'd be part of...but once I did the screen test, about three weeks later I was on a plane to San Francisco to shoot the first season...I remember that first day on set, sitting down next to Tom Colicchio...and we looked at each other like: "Let's do this! We could become the laughingstock of our industry, or we could do something really great and really serious about food." And we immediately realized that this was something that was serious about food.

Tom Colicchio, Padma Lakshmi, Hugh Acheson, and Richard Blais—your fellow judges—are all parents as well. Do you swap stories and tips?

We do! If you include [guest judges] Emeril Lagasse, Wolfgang Puck, Eric Ripert, Anthony Bourdain, every single major judge on the show is a parent. I was the last one to join the club, so to speak... I turn to Tom and Padma and Hugh, for sure, because they're the three that I spend the most time with. As parents, they've given me great advice and amazing hand-me-downs. My baby's favorite play mat is from Hugh, my baby's highchair is Padma's daughter's highchair...

They've also just been great role models for me, especially because our job is so unique—none of us have 9-5 jobs, none of us have two days that are the same. That, for me, is the biggest struggle about being a mom. The routine and having to travel and be away from my daughter—or, on the flipside, having to take her with me on the road.

What's it like traveling for "Top Chef" with your daughter?

It has been amazing for me because, since Padma had a daughter a few years before me, the production of "Top Chef" was set up, the precedent was set. They knew what it was like to have an infant on-set with us at all times. By the time I brought Dahlia, my daughter, everyone on the crew knew exactly what it was going to be like—the breaks for me to breastfeed or setting up a nursery wherever we were so that my baby was comfortable—because they'd done it already with Padma.

Do you have any personal philosophies for staying balanced?

Do whatever you have to do to get through the day! It's a lot of being flexible, being adaptable, and knowing that your day is just not going to go, ever, as you plan it to go—but that doesn't mean it won't work... I do think that bringing my daughter on the road with me from such an early age made her easy-going and adaptable. When I've needed her to help mama get through the day because we were taking a flight or I had to be on-set for 14 hours and didn't get the time with her that she needed, she just gets it, little Dahlia Rae, she really does.

Is Dahlia proving to be a developing foodie?

Right now, she eats everything... She started eating at about 5 months, and from about 5 months to 7 or 8 months, I was making purees for her. Every kind of puree—beet and squash and peas and just about anything I could get my hands on. And at about 8 months, she just stopped eating purees. So now I have a freezer full of purees... We've been using the purees now as sauces. So I'll make pasta and, instead of making a tomato sauce, I'll just take a puree and warm it up.

Tell us about the food influences that were present in your childhood.

I'm an immigrant to this country from Canada, and although that doesn't feel like I'm immigrating from anywhere that far, truthfully, there are subtle differences between Canada and the States. There are definitely food traditions in Canada that I want to preserve for my daughter—little things, flavors, and dishes that you can't find here. And then my parents—my father is from South Africa and my mother's from Canada, but her parents were immigrants from Russia and Poland. So the food traditions that I grew up with from their home countries were really important to me.

We love the fun mood of "The Feed" that you're doing now with chef Marcus Samuelsson and comedian Max Silvestri. Tell us about that project.

Marcus and I, and Max Silvestri, basically were given free rein to do all the things we don't normally get to do on television. We were just sent on these crazy food adventures: What's the next mash-up? What's the next artisanal craze? Following trends that are at-this-moment in the food scene and creating our

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This page: Photos by David Moir/Bravo Media

own versions... It's all light-hearted and tongue-in-cheek, but also it's good to not take food so seriously. We were making fun of a lot of things in the food world that people get so serious about, but at the same time, we wanted to educate people about how interesting [food can be]... I think what's great about the show in general is that I got to be myself—"Top Chef," although it's me, is a very edited, judge-y version of me, and people think I'm this very serious person. "The Feed" let me be silly and be myself a little more, and let loose and actually get my hands dirty cooking, which is actually what I love to do the most!

With all your different TV projects, what is your role as special projects director like at *Food & Wine*?

My job there has changed over the years and has evolved as my life on television has evolved. I've been with *Food & Wine* for 10 years... I have an office there, I'm there a few times a week, for sure, but really I'm the ambassador for the magazine... It's a fun friendship—it's more than a friendship, they're my home base. We've crafted this job together over the years, and they've let me run with these crazy ideas.

You're also involved with some great charitable organizations—tell us how you got involved and why giving back is important to you.

I feel so grateful that I grew up in a home that was fortunate enough to eat fresh food every day and to be now working in an industry where I get to eat the best food from around the world—my job is to travel and eat great food, there's nothing more extraordinary than that. So I think it's important, because of that, to acknowledge that that's a rarity... Access to affordable, fresh food should be a right, not a privilege, and unfortunately that's not the case... So I try to focus most of my time on charity organizations that address that problem and finding solutions to it. City Harvest is an organization that I've been working with for a few years—I'm on their food council, I volunteer with them in many ways, and attend their events... They're an amazing, very special organization that I am so thrilled to



Top and above inset: Gail Simmons filming season 12 of "Top Chef."

be able to work with. Another organization [that I work with is] Common Threads. Common Threads is a combination of working in food deserts that are underserved, and working with children in underserved communities to teach them about non-violence [and] conflict resolution, all through the guise of food.

Do you have any New Year's resolutions?

Every year I feel like I have the same resolutions: Spend more time with my family, always, always, always, especially now more than ever. And "trim the fat" is an expression we use a lot in my house—and that's "trim the fat" literally and figuratively. Eat healthier, slow down, cut out the non-necessary clutter in life, and focus on what's most important.

Do you have any tips for families resolving to spice up their family meals in 2015?

For families whose resolution is to eat healthier, and introduce more healthy, interesting food into their diet, I always say: Go to the grocery store and buy one fruit or vegetable you've never tried, once a week, and figure out how to cook it, make it a Quickfire Challenge for your family. Buy kohlrabi, buy a pomelo, buy some purple kale, and look up what it is and how to cook it.

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