

M & V

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visionaries*

THE
FOOD
Issue

**ARE AIRPORTS THE NEXT
culinary hot spots?**

**Laissez les bons
temps rouler**
IN NEW ORLEANS

+
**6 fabulous
FALL COCKTAILS**

GAIL SIMMONS
THE CULINARY IMPRESARIO HITS HER STRIDE

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The
Adventurous
PALATE

CULINARY EXPERT GAIL SIMMONS PROVES
THAT FOOD IS THE SECRET TO A HAPPY LIFE.

By *Lola Th  lin*
Photography by *Walling MaGartiy*

Victoria Victoria Beckham dress;
Schutz shoes; Rue Gombon
earrings; A.V. Max bracelet



Baraschi dress; Donald earrings and ring

Almost 13 years ago a television network called Bravo decided to revamp its programming from performing arts to pop culture. The network had been around since 1980 and introduced some of the country's first reality programs in 2003. Bravo struck a cord in America's hearts by producing addictive and quirky reality shows. Then they struck gold with the debut of *Top Chef* in 2006. Amid the cast of judges was a seemingly unknown, yet unforgettable, brunette.

Gail Simmons was making noise in the food industry long before she was a *Top Chef* judge. Food was her life, her nourishment, her vocation and her inspiration. Eventually, her career would reach a fevered pitch with the Emmy-winning show, but Simmons admits it was never a planned trajectory—naturally since no such show had ever aired—but her entrepreneurial outlook allowed her to apply both creative and predictive logic. She never walked a traditional career line; instead she accepted every opportunity, staying focused on the end goal and furthering her knowledge of everything food, from its culture and history to its benefits and pleasures.

It's easy to understand why the nuances of food are such an integral part of her life; it began at home in Toronto, Canada. Simmons' mother Renée, who was a food writer for *Globe & Mail*, Canada's largest national newspaper, taught her to be curious about food. Renée also hosted a cooking class in the family home for women in the neighborhood. She even hosted a men's class—almost a laugh in those days, adds Simmons. The classes grew so large that she took over the home economics room of the local junior high school. After graduating from McGill University in Montreal with a focus in anthropology and Spanish, Simmons worked for over a year in Toronto for a magazine and newspaper as an editorial assistant. She tried not to follow her mother's footsteps, but it's hard to deny a passion.

"I came to New York City not knowing a single person in the food world. I walked into culinary school not knowing what I was going to do, but I knew I was going to love it and I was excited about it. From there, opportunities came. I think I had, to some extent, a level of confidence but not arrogance. I [was] humble in the kitchen and, more importantly, I was humbled by the kitchen," says Simmons. "I feel very lucky that I was able to keep my eyes open and my mouth shut and let other people teach me."



“We thought Top Chef was going to be one season. I’d do it for a month and come back to my life, but it just got bigger and bigger.”

Lulus skirt and top; Melinda Maria earrings; Tresor Collection ring; A.V. Max bracelet; Lulus shoes

“The fact that I worked on the line for a period of time taught me to speak the language of the kitchen.”

After attending The Peter Kump New York Cooking School (now the Institute of Culinary Education), Simmons got in line, the kitchen line to be exact. She first worked at Le Cirque 2000 and later at Jean-Georges' Vong, both in New York City. Her school career services director then introduced her to Jeffrey Steingarten, *Vogue's* food critic since 1989, for whom she worked for two years. “In retrospect, I would say it was all good experience. There's no question I could not do what I do now if I hadn't had those experiences. They were ass kicking for sure, but as they should be,” says Simmons. “The fact that I worked on the line for a period of time taught me to speak the language of the kitchen. It played a major role in allowing me to have a voice with a level of authenticity. It also lets chefs trust me to talk to them.” After a temporary return to Canada due to work visa hassles, Simmons received a phone call from Georgette Farkas, then marketing maven for chef Daniel Boulud, who was ready to hire the young Canadian as a special events manager.

Simmons' presence in the food industry continued to grow, and she eventually hooked up with *Food & Wine* magazine. In 2004 she switched back from restaurants to food media by accepting the job of marketing manager for *Food & Wine*. A year in, Simmons began directing the Food & Wine Classic in Aspen, a job she did for five years. In 2005 Bravo and *Food & Wine* struck a deal with *Top Chef*, and the magazine sent Simmons to do a screen test. “We thought *Top Chef* was going to be one season. I'd do it for a month and come back to my life, but it just got bigger and bigger,” Simmons said. Spin-off shows and great opportunities followed, causing Simmons to revisit her role with the magazine. While she handed off the Food & Wine Classic, she kept the rest of her magazine role as brand ambassa-

dor, which includes representing the magazine on *Top Chef*. Today she is the director of special projects.

“The biggest compliment I get is when people come up to me in the most surprising places and situations and tell me that because of *Top Chef*, they eat differently. Their language of food has expanded. Their children cook with them. Their children want



to be chefs. It's a compliment; I've helped to change the way the public thinks about food. In the long term, it adds up. They are eating better, making better choices for their families, spending more time together.”

Let's not forget the other stars *Top Chef* has introduced to the public. For instance, Carla Hall is now co-host for ABC's *The Chew* and opens a Brooklyn restaurant this fall. Fabio Viviani's brand includes wines, cookbooks and cookware. Richard Blais has three restaurants and a James Beard Award-nom-

inated cookbook. Stephanie Izard, Kristen Kish and Tiffani Faison have all gone mainstream. The list of successes goes on.

In 12 seasons, three female chefs, or 25 percent, have won. Yet people often ask, “Why have so few women chefs won?” “People are convinced the numbers are skewed, but they aren't,” Simmons says. “We start every season almost 50/50, which is not indicative of the industry. The industry's average, I think, is under 20 percent. A fourth of winners have been women, which is higher than the industry average of women who are heads of kitchens.” Perhaps the 13th season, filmed in six California cities and premiering this winter, will see a fourth female winner.

When Simmons isn't traveling for work, she's home in Brooklyn, where husband Jeremy Abrams and her daughter Dahlia Rae await, although they often accompany her. She says, “[Dahlia] has done some great traveling in the [22] months she's been alive, and she's a great eater.”

Of course, food isn't always about decadence. Simmons sits on boards of City Harvest, Hot Bread Kitchen, Common Threads, the Institute of Culinary Education and the Women at NBCU Advisory Board. She is an entrepreneur-in-residence at Babson College, mentoring student entrepreneurs to help develop socially conscious food-related enterprises in strategic marketing and communications.

“There is not a single chef or a person working in the industry that doesn't spend time every day thinking about how lucky we are to do this job. If at the core of what we do is feed people, then our responsibility lies with the great majority of people who don't have access to food [and making sure they are] respected, reached, encouraged and represented.”