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Giada De Laurentiis will cook, charm at Atlanta food show

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By Melissa Ruggieri
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

As you might expect, Giada De Laurentiis and Paula Deen see quite a bit of each other.

> It's not as if they're in some super-secret celebrity chef cabal, but as two of the Food Network's most prominent female stars, their paths often intertwine.
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> "She's sort of like my mama bear on the road," De Laurentiis said with a bright laugh.
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> The pair, along with Patrick and Gina Neely, will cross spoons again this weekend at The Metropolitan Cooking & Entertaining Show at Cobb Galleria Centre.

More than 20,000 culinary curiosity seekers and aficionados are expected to attend the two-day food-a-thon, which will feature about 200 exhibitors selling products and offering samples, live cooking demonstrations, kids' cooking classes and specialty events such as presentations and book signings by the three marquee names.

De Laurentiis, the star of such Food Network shows as "Giada at Home" and "Everyday Italian" – as well as a "Today" show staple -- is regarded as much for her petite-ness and beauty as she is her ragù.

In a recent phone interview from her home in Los Angeles, the cheerful chef, author and TV presence discussed the three "pretty simple" dishes she'll prepare at her Atlanta appearance April 30: An orzo with smoky tomato vinaigrette, which will soon be shown on "Giada at Home"; salmon cakes, which she said is a favorite of her 3-year-old daughter, Jade, likely because of the crunch that comes from the saltine crackers she uses for binding; and raspberry parfaits, made with fresh raspberries and balsamic vinegar.

The De Laurentiis touch comes with the topping – brown sugar and butter melted in a skillet, cooled until hardened, then broken into toffee-like pieces and sprinkled on top.

If you plan to attend De Laurentiis' presentation in the Smithfield Celebrity Theater (which requires an extra ticket), be advised that she does encourage audience participation and will usually bring a spectator on stage – often with mixed results.

"Sometimes people's spouses or friends egg them on to come up and they get up there and completely clam up when they see all of these eyeballs staring at them. They think, 'Yes, yes, yes, I want to do this,' and then they can't speak and start sweating," she said, her voice tinged with empathy.

De Laurentiis, 40, debuted on the Food Network in 2002, after a network executive read an article in "Food & Wine" magazine about her cooking prowess and the family meal traditions involving her grandfather, Dino De Laurentiis, who died last year.

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She's the first to admit that she was "awful" during her initial shows.

"I was painfully shy," she said. "I picked this profession – cooking – because you got to be in the back kitchen. This world is not what people like myself choose. It was a torturous ride for me, but I always say to people, it was like intensive therapy. You're your own worse critic and it forces you to become comfortable in your own skin."

Still naturally introverted when hanging out with husband, Todd, and Jade, De Laurentiis has nonetheless found that comfort zone on camera and is trying to share her experiences with contestants on "Food Network Star," the reality series that awards a chef his or her own show on the network.

Though she served as an on-set mentor for last year's sixth season, De Laurentiis will instead take a seat among the judges for the seventh season, which filmed in Los Angeles and a bit in New York and begins airing June 5.

When it's noted that the expressive Guy Fieri is the only true breakout star to come from the series, De Laurentiis agrees that it's extremely difficult to find contestants equally adept at cooking, chatting and being charming.

"Sometimes their culinary chops are unbelievable, but I wouldn't want to watch their shows. Other people have such a great spark, but I would never want to eat their food. Some of them do grow into both roles. It's an unbelievable growth period," she said.

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But now that Jade is mobile, DeLaurentiis intends to do some special episodes of the show in the fall.

And will the little one join her on camera?

DeLaurentiis sighs and laughs again.

"If she so desires."

Perhaps the next, *next* Food Network star is already in the making.

Event preview

The Metropolitan Cooking & Entertaining Show

10 a.m.-6 p.m. April 30 and 10 a.m.-5 p.m. May 1. $22 (general admission in advance), $25 (general admission on site); $12 (children 4-12 in advance), $15 (children 4-12 on site); free for children 4 and under; additional tickets required for special events and entry to beer, wine and spirits tent. Cobb Galleria Centre, 2 Galleria Parkway, Atlanta. 1-888-695-0888, www.metrocooking.com.