

GAIL SIMMONS

By Adrianna Paidas
photographer: Nathan Johnson

Almost 20 years ago, culinary expert, food writer and Top Chef judge Gail Simmons went to culinary school then worked as a line cook in some of New York's most legendary restaurants - not because she wanted to be a chef, but because she simply wanted to write about food for a living.

You need to know about food," she says while in her kitchen testing recipes. "It's like, why would I read a column about politics from someone who knows nothing about politics. If you want to be a war reporter, you need to go to the war, you can't be sitting comfortably in the suburbs.

This gusto and frankness is part of the reason Simmons has made a name for herself in the culinary world today. She's spoken her mind on Bravo's hit reality cooking competition series Top Chef since 2006 alongside culinary greats like Tom Colicchio, Eric Ripert and Anthony Bourdain. And since 2004, Simmons has been Special Projects Director at Food & Wine magazine.



Photographer **Nathan Johnson**
Location **Sanctuary Hotel NYC**
Stylist **Steven Kinlock** for Epiphany Artist Group, Inc.
Clothes **All Talents Own**
Makeup **Jan Pedis**
Groomer **Cynthia Alvarez** for Dove Hair/Epiphany Artist Group, Inc.



Before that she headed special events for Chef Daniel Boulud's restaurant empire and also assisted Jeffrey Steingarten, leading food writer and food critic at Vogue.

She has worked her way up the ladder since her days as a culinary student turned line cook. Though to this day she vows that professional cooking in New York's finest restaurants was her toughest gig. "It was the hardest work I've ever done in my life," she says, tipping her hat to all those who work in restaurant kitchens for a living. Born and raised in Toronto, Simmons's mother always enjoyed cooking and taught culinary classes in their home. But it wasn't until she graduated college that Simmons realized she wanted to write about food.

In 1999 she trekked to New York City and enrolled in culinary school in order to establish herself as a reputable source on all things food. After graduating, she trained in the kitchens of the esteemed NYC hotspot Le Cirque 2000 and Chef Jean-Georges's groundbreaking Vong. One book she read at the time would change her life, Vogue food critic Jeffrey Steingarten's collection of essays. The minute she finished it, she knew she had to assist him at the magazine. So she asked her culinary school's career office what she needed to do in order to work for Steingarten and as luck would have it he had called that week looking for an assistant. Serendipity at its finest: A few weeks later Simmons was Steingarten's assistant. She went on to work with him for almost two years.

Simmons then made the jump to Food & Wine where she began doing talk show food segments. And before she knew it, Bravo was knocking at her door with an idea for a competition series in which chefs would cook against each and

be judged by experts. Top Chef was born.

As an expert judge on the show, Simmons sticks strictly to the here-and-now philosophy when tasting the contestant's dishes. "I never base my decision on what the person made yesterday or what they'll make tomorrow," she says. "It has to be based on what they cooked today, and that's all."

Today, the show is one of many projects Simmons works on. She's written a memoir chronicling entitled Talking With My Mouth Full: My Life As A Professional Eater. She's made non-competitive TV shows with celebrity chefs like Marcus Samuelsson and continually appears on cooking segments for the "Today Show" among others. And 17 months ago, her and her husband welcomed a baby girl, who's become her favorite travel buddy. Amidst her hectic schedule, Simmons still finds time to work with several charities around the U.S. One of which is Common Threads, an organization that teaches under-privileged children about the importance of nutrition and fosters an appreciation of cultural diversity through cooking.

"It teaches kids collaboration, tolerance, conflict resolution and teamwork." Simmons says. "Cooking in general and eating together has such huge lessons for young people." In the future, Simmons hopes to travel a little less while raising her daughter. She'd like to write her own cookbook, a goal she hasn't tackled yet. But no matter, what she'll continue to champion great food, talented chefs and superb restaurants. "I like to think of myself as a restaurant and chef cheerleader," she says "I hope to keep talking about food and good quality food and the enjoyment and importance of the table to as many people as possible."