

Food and Cooking

Celebrity Chef Chat

She's the power behind food television

JoAnn Cianciulli was a producer for 'MasterChef'

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Peek behind the scenes of hundreds of cooking shows and you'll likely find JoAnn Cianciulli.

From countless shows on Food Network to Bravo's "Top Chef," Cianciulli has helped create a new genre known as food television. Most recently, she was the supervising culinary producer of Fox's "MasterChef," starring Gordon Ramsay, Graham Elliot and Joe Bastianich. She also authored the companion "MasterChef Cookbook" (\$24.99, Rodale).

After studying film and television at New York University, she headed for California and the movie business. Always a food lover, she learned the language of chefs at her father's restaurant in Queens, New York. That passion for food, and the ability to communicate with

chefs, helped her create a unique career in food television and cookbooks.

She's collaborated on cookbooks with Tyler Florence, Aaron Sanchez and Michael Mina. Now she's co-authoring "Michael's Genuine Food & Drink" with James Beard Award-winner Michael Schwartz. Next up, she's producing "Marcel's Quantum Kitchen," a look at molecular gastronomy expected to air in February on SyFy Channel.

Q. How did you get started in the kitchen?

A. I grew up in a restaurant family. My father owned an Italian restaurant in Queens. The funny connection (with "MasterChef") is my father bought Lidia Bastianich's first restaurant (Buonavia). So Joe (Bastianich) and I are like brothers from another mother. Ironically, both our parents owned the same restaurant. When I was hired on the show and we were looking for judges, I immediately thought of him. We didn't want all chefs as judges; it's ideal to mix it up. For instance, as a restaurateur, Joe talks about food in a very different voice than a chef does. I want to be clear that I am not a chef! I've been fortunate to turn my food passion into a unique hybrid career of food and entertainment.

Q. Of all the chefs you've met, who most inspired you?

A. Thomas Keller. When I met him, my palms got sweaty! He's just a chef . . . But for me that was the pinnacle. He's it.

Q. What might surprise people about "MasterChef"?

A. Months and months and months of preparation. I don't know if people know there's an enormous back kitchen I run. We not only do the dishes, I do the ordering, we get set up for the challenges, all the food displays. . . . You can't talk if contestants are anywhere around. We're really strict on the rules and it being fair. I don't know if a lot of people know that or assume reality television is fake, but this show—what you see is really what happens.

Q. You've stocked numerous pantries for television shows. What should every pantry have?

A. Good oils, good vinegars. Little things make such a difference. . . . Get yourself a solid peppermill and toast the peppercorns lightly in a dry skillet to really bring out the flavor.

Q. What should home cooks spend money on?

A. Knives. Those "always sharp (not possible) and open your mail with it (flimsy)" ones you see on TV are not even worth however much you're paying for it. You're still getting ripped off. A good quality knife, usually around \$85, will come with a guarantee. It will last a lifetime or more. . . . Buy it right, buy it once.

Q. Biggest challenge when taking food events on location?

A. In the field, we call it. One show we fed 400 Marines at Camp Pendleton. The volume of ordering and getting it there ahead is intense. Another episode, we shot at a truck stop on the side of the road. No running water or refrigeration. We brought in grills, tanks of water, and two refrigerated trucks.

Q. You've said "MasterChef" has been the most satisfying show of your career. Why?

A. It hits home for me. I had a hobby of cooking and made it into a career, which is the sentiment of MasterChef. This is the most significant show I've ever done—it's on Fox, and it's big. And the subject, it's not just a dump and stir show, as it is called. It's reality, but it's not cut-throat. It's none of that nonsense. The show and cookbook are really about the food, and that's not always the case.

Q. Which cookbooks are on your shelf?

A. For Italian I'd go to Lidia (Bastianich) for sure. Her recipes make sense. They're not overly complicated and they're authentic. Next to her I have Nancy Silverton. Tyler Florence because I worked for him for so many years I know we eat very similar foods. . . . Mark Bittman's "How to Cook Everything," which is kind of the new "Joy of Cooking." If I need to know how to make anything, if I'm writing a cookbook and need to check a ratio . . . Mark Bittman breaks it down.

Q. What's next for you?

A. A new molecular gastronomy show for SyFy Channel, "Marcel's Quantum Kitchen." It stars Marcel Vigneron of "Top Chef" fame. I actually was his culinary producer on TC LA and it feels so good to be working with him on his show and have it come full circle. He LOVES his cooking toys and this is like no other show I have ever done.

- Kristine M. Kierzek, *Special to the Journal Sentinel*