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Foodies get fill of all things culinary at Food Network bash in Nashville

By Jennifer Biggs (Contact), Memphis Commercial Appeal

Wednesday, August 5, 2009

Let's set the record straight: No one threw a radish at me, despite what you might have read on my blog, Whining & Dining. I got flour thrown on me, I left the stage with food in my hair, and by walking around the tiny stage kitchen with a chef's knife pointed outward, I completely showed what an "Am" I am during the Opryland Pro/Am Chef Competition at last weekend's Food Network Southern Food & Wine Festival in Nashville. But there was no radish hurled my way.



Pat and Gina Neely chat with one of their fans at the Food Network Southern Food & Wine Festival. The Neelys were among the Food Network stars who entertained and informed almost 7,000 festivalgoers last weekend.



Jamie and Bobby Deen take festival attendees back 20 years to the door-to-door sandwich business started by mom Paula Deen.



The Southern Food and Wine Festival offers a dizzying array of cooking demonstrations.



Eager crowds snap up free samples as they roam the floor of the exhibition hall in Nashville.

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The weekend was full of events for foodies (about 7,000 were there), far more than one person could take in, but the highlights of the festival were the seminars hosted by Food Network celebrities Alton Brown, Jamie and Bobby Deen, and Memphis' own Pat and Gina Neely.

On Friday night, the Deen brothers took the stage to the tune of The Hollies' "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" and charmed the crowd.

"What's so funny is that we actually sing that song to each other," Bobby said after they offered their "Hi y'all's."

During a surprisingly informal and intimate session, they talked about their mother, Paula Deen, and how her business started 20 years ago. Jamie told about Paula and Aunt Peggy using clean underwear for hair nets when they first started the Bag Lady, which was their door-to-door sandwich business.

They operated from a one-bathroom home shared by the Deen parents, Bobby and Jamie and their girlfriends.

"The girls we were dating? Mama pimped them out, too," Jamie said.

A city inspector's visit resulted in the Deens finding a restaurant location in a Days Inn, where, after lean times, they hit on the idea of a Wednesday buffet. It was a success and provided the model for The Lady and Sons, which they opened next (all in Savannah, Ga.). After that, it was a whirlwind. The restaurant was named the best in the world by the USA Today restaurant reviewer in December 1999, a book deal followed and then the now-famous visit by Gordon Elliott catapulted Paula to Food Network fame.

Brown's presentation was more true to his style of food science and good food combined, but having just dropped more than 40 pounds, he's spreading the gospel of healthful eating -- in this case, fish. Not just any fish, though: He's big on sustainable seafood, preached a little against our tendency to overfish when we find something we like, and then took to the trout, raising gasps and groans from the audience when he twisted the head off a fish as he readied it for cooking.

"When you start dealing with small fish, you gotta look 'em in their beady little eyes," he said, pointing out that as a cut meat, beef lovin' nation, we've gotten away from seeing food that looks like something that was recently living.

Then he sticks his finger in a trout's mouth and makes it talk.

Not surprisingly, when it was time to smoke the fish, he brought out not a commercial smoker, but a tricked-out box from a military surplus store.

Mitzi and Phil Pilcher of Lakeland were in the audience.

"We enjoyed it thoroughly, both of us. We especially liked his topic. In the last year or so, we've gotten into smoking fish on our Weber smoker. I asked Phil if he was going to make one of those smokers, and he said he didn't think so," said Mitzi Pilcher.

I missed the Neelys' seminar, which conflicted with my stage debut as an amateur chef, but Kalisa Hyman, their personal manager, said it was sold out and shared the recipes with us.

Though Pat and Gina are from Memphis, their big break came in Nashville. Brother Tony Neely was going to be out of town when the Deen brothers came to film for their show "Road Tasted." Pat and Gina drove up to take his place, Gina's firm direction with getting the set in order got the attention of producer Mark Schneider and ultimately resulted in their show.

And they enjoyed being in Nashville.

"Pat and I travel to a lot of places, but there's nothing like doing a show at home," Gina wrote in an e-mail.

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"We met a lot of fans, made new friends and had the chance to share our passion for what we do. The crowd was awesome and the show rocked," Pat wrote.

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At the Pro/Am competition, both teams (Mary Constantine, the food editor from the Knoxville News Sentinel, was on the opposing team) were given a plate of beautiful, huge shrimp and a veal loin, then given three minutes to plan a menu around it, also using items from a common table. Well, methinks this was not entirely a surprise menu to chef Chris Knightly, our team leader, as he had the menu prepared inside of 60 seconds. Why, he even had the risotto nearly cooked and waiting on the table ...

Columnists

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But it was fun, even if I was limited to shucking corn, chopping tomatoes and parsley. I did get to present the food to the judges, who were selected from the audience and encouraged by Opryland executive chef Michael Swann to throw food at the chefs when their dishes received less than a three out of a possible five rating. My team lost. One of our dishes was veal tartare, and it was stated again and again that our failing was that people wanted their food *cooked*.

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All in all, it was a great weekend for food lovers. There was a wine tasting each day, special dinners held in the hotel's restaurants, and an exhibition hall full of mostly local food vendors.

"It all interested us, because we love food and wine," Phil Pilcher said. "We just enjoyed the experience. It was one of the most fun weekends we've had in a long time. The reason that we travel is to eat good food and drink good wine."

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Smoked Trout

1 quart water

1/2 cup kosher salt

2 lbs. trout fillets, 3 to 5 oz. each, skin on, bones removed

Place the water and the salt in a 3- to 4-quart container and stir until salt has dissolved, 1 to 2 minutes. Add the trout, making sure pieces are submerged. Cover and refrigerate for 3 hours.

Remove trout from brine, rinse thoroughly and pat dry. Place trout, skin side down, onto a cooling rack set in a sheet pan. Dry in the refrigerator 21 to 24 hours or until the skin becomes shiny and somewhat tacky to the touch.

The next day, turn the smoker on so that it maintains a temperature of 150-160 degrees. Place the trout on racks, skin side down, separated by at least 1/4 inch. Place racks in smoker and adjust heat as needed to maintain. Cook for 2 1/2 to 3 hours, or until the fish is tender, cooked through and has the desired level of smoke flavor.

Source: Alton Brown

Savannah Crab Cake Sliders with Homemade Tartar Sauce

1 lb crab meat, picked free of shell

1/2 cup crushed Ritz crackers

3 green onions, finely chopped, with tops

1/2 cup finely chopped bell pepper

1 tsp. salt

Dash of cayenne pepper

1/4 cup mayonnaise

1 egg

1 tsp. Worcestershire sauce

1 tsp. dry mustard

Juice of 1/2 lemon

1/4 tsp. garlic powder

Flour for dusting

1/2 cup peanut oil

1 package mini buns
2 medium beefsteak tomatoes
1 bunch of romaine lettuce leaves
1 purple onion

Tartar sauce:

1/2 cup chopped green onion
1/2 cup chopped dill pickle
1 cup mayonnaise
1/2 tsp. House Seasoning (mix 1 cup salt; 1/4 cup black pepper; 1/4 cup garlic powder)

Mix all ingredients for crab cakes together (first 12), except flour and peanut oil. Shape into small patties to fit mini buns and dust with flour. Pan fry in hot peanut oil over medium heat or until browned, for approximately 4 to 5 minutes. Flip and pan fry other side until golden brown. Place patties onto buns and garnish with tartar sauce, tomato, lettuce and onion if desired.

To make the tartar sauce, combine chopped onion, pickle, mayonnaise, and House Seasoning and mix well. Serve alongside crab cakes with lemon wedges.

Serves 6.

Source: Jamie and Bobby Deen

Barbecue Spaghetti

2 tbsp. olive oil
1/4 cup diced yellow onion
1/2 cup diced green bell pepper
2 cloves garlic, minced
4 cups Neely's Barbecue Sauce
2 lbs. cooked spaghetti
2 lbs. smoked pork, beef or chicken, coarsely chopped
Hot sauce, optional

Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the onion, bell pepper and garlic, and cook, stirring frequently to prevent sticking, until the vegetables have softened (3 to 4 minutes). Reduce the heat to low, stir in barbecue sauce, and simmer for about 5 minutes or until slightly reduced. When you are ready to serve, add the spaghetti, smoked meat and hot sauce, if desired. Toss well to combine. Serves 8 to 10.

Source: "Down Home with the Neelys," Pat and Gina Neely

Sweet and Spicy Slaw

1 small head green cabbage
1 small head red cabbage
4 carrots
1 medium yellow onion
1/2 cup mayonnaise
1/4 cup prepared yellow mustard
2 tsp. apple cider vinegar
1 cup sugar
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
1/2 tsp. cayenne pepper

Kosher salt

Cut the cabbages in quarters and remove the cores. Peel the carrots and onion and slice into pieces that will fit through the feed tube of a food processor. Fit the food processor with the large-holed grater attachment and push the cabbage, carrot and onions through the tube to grate. Toss together in a large bowl.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the mayonnaise, mustard, vinegar, sugar, black pepper and cayenne until the sugar is dissolved. Toss with the cabbage mixture and season with salt and additional black pepper to taste. Cover with plastic wrap and chill for at least 2 hours before serving. Serves 6 to 8.

Source: "Down Home with the Neelys," Pat and Gina Neely