

The Many Sides of Scott Conant

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CHEF WRITTEN Q & A

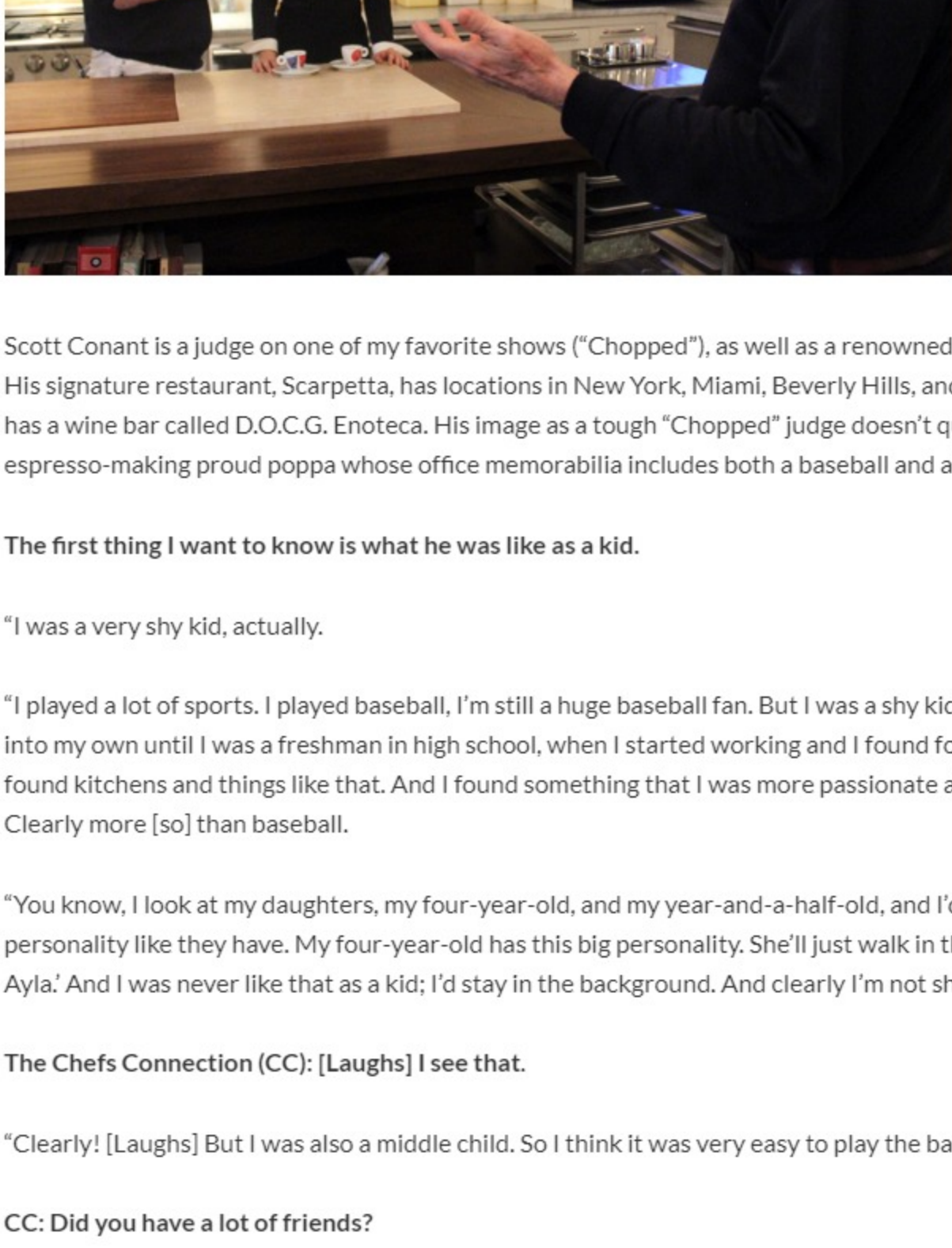
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"This is my forte. Give me an opportunity to talk about me, and normally I take it."

This is how Scott Conant starts our interview. We're sitting in his office inside the SCM Culinary Suite in Soho, having just finished shooting a slightly wacky interview for The Chef's Connection with Cristina Cote. Our team is all hopped up on espresso, which Conant made for us himself before the camera started rolling.



Scott Conant is a judge on one of my favorite shows ("Chopped"), as well as a renowned chef and entrepreneur. His signature restaurant, Scarpetta, has locations in New York, Miami, Beverly Hills, and Las Vegas, where he also has a wine bar called D.O.C.G. Enoteca. His image as a tough "Chopped" judge doesn't quite jibe with the funny, espresso-making prod prod props whose office memorabilia includes both a baseball and a Tibetan singing bowl.

The first thing I want to know is what he was like as a kid.

"I was a very shy kid, actually.

"I played a lot of sports. I played baseball, I'm still a huge baseball fan. But I was a shy kid, and I don't think I came into my own until I was a freshman in high school, when I started working and I found food. I found restaurants, I found kitchens and things like that. And I found something that I was more passionate about than anything really. Clearly more [so] than baseball.

"You know, I look at my daughters, my four-year-old, and my year-and-a-half-old, and I'd never had that personality like they have. My four-year-old has this real personality. She'll just walk in the room and say, "Hi, I'm Ayla." And I was never like that as a kid; I'd stay in the background. And clearly I'm not shy now."

The Chef's Connection (CC): [Laughs] I see that.

"Clearly! [Laughs] But I was also a middle child. So I think it was very easy to play the background."

CC: Did you have a lot of friends?

"I didn't have a lot of friends until I started working ... and then what happened was, it was kind of two separate worlds. I had my school friends, and I had my work friends. Two separate groups of people. One, the work guys, much older than the friends that I went to school with."

CC: So was it hard to be such a driven kid at a young age?

"I think my friends didn't understand that I would work 60 hours a week, plus go to high school. So, I mean, I don't know how many hours are in a school day at this point ... "

CC: Four.

"[Laughs] It [was] a tremendous amount of work! My parents, at least they knew where I was, I wasn't getting into trouble. I was a good kid. What they didn't know didn't hurt them. [Laughs] And then I would just work all the time.

"I was one of those people that once I found **Escoffier** and once I found **Larousse Gastronomique**, I would read that stuff all the time. I was just fascinated by it. And I used to have this crazy knowledge of Escoffier. I was nineteen, twenty when I started culinary school at CIA [**Culinary Institute of America**] and I had this encyclopedic knowledge of Escoffier. People would ask me questions; I'd be like this, this, and this. And I've since unfortunately forgotten all of it. But I used to really love it."

CC: What were some of the hardest lessons you had to learn?

"The hardest lessons came much later on. The hardest lessons in life are, I think, despite ... [stops to think] ... a couple of things. You realize you've got to take care of yourself. No matter how talented you are, no matter who represents you, no matter what the situation is, no matter who your attorney is, all that kind of stuff; you need to take care of yourself. And if you don't realize that, life is going to kick your ass until you realize. That's what happened.

"And that's business, that's life, and that's the restaurant world, and that's any world, and that's any business. That's whenever you're entrepreneurial, whenever you have a talent, people are going to try to get what they can out of that talent. So whether you're in a restaurant, or you're on a TV show, or you're in an interview with a wonderful person like yourself, there's gonna be things that I don't want to talk about, there's gonna be things that you want me to talk about, or there's going to be money that I'm making that you want, and that I don't want to give you. And that's just life."

CC: Did you ever get either a really great piece of advice, or a piece of advice that was so bad that you learned to do the opposite?

"Well that was most of my career. [Laughs]

"I worked with wonderful people, but I also worked with some really bad people. I remember, there was a time – I could tell you story after story after story – there was a time I worked with some restaurant group. They had a bunch of restaurants here in the city, and in different cities around the U.S., and there were two owners in particular. They decided [that] they needed to send their girlfriends out of town. So they took payroll, which was thirty thousand dollars, they gave it to the two women, they said, "Okay, go to Italy!" Which meant neither me nor my staff could get paid for at least two weeks, because the money's gone. That was two weeks of payroll.

"There were other moments. I'm not going to go down the list, lists and lists and lists, of things. Listen: everybody brings their own level of stuff" to the table, right? We've all got our baggage. We've all got our backgrounds and the things that we're dealing with and some people deal with the stuff better than others. I think that the learning lesson was, whatever it is that I'm going through, it should never have an effect on my staff. Just like it should never have an effect on my kids. It shouldn't be that way. It's MY stuff. It shouldn't be theirs. If I can't afford to pay them, then shut the restaurant down, or find the money, or don't take money.

"But whatever it is, these guys still managed to have their blow, and they still they still managed to have their beautiful apartments, and all the kind of stuff that they had, and we had to suffer. The dishwasher. The pasta cook. Me. The sous chef. Everybody else had to suffer, while they just brushed it off as part of doing business. It is part of doing business, but it shouldn't be part of doing business. You know what I mean?"

CC: Absolutely. So how about in a positive way, what great examples did you see?

"You know what? I observe a lot. I really do. I look at other people, and even if I've never worked with them, like Jean-Georges, like Danny Meyer, like Daniel Boulud, and like the attitude that Eric Ripert brings to the table. He's such a positive influence, such a positive individual."

CC: We just interviewed him, and he was amazing.

"Did you? He's an amazing, amazing man."

CC: Buddhist, very centered, very present.

"Exactly. Very present, extremely humble. And also very gracious. Not just gracious with the people that he surrounds himself with, but also gracious with where he is in life. It's an amazing thing.

"So I always feel like those are the people that I look at. And it's not just the four star great chefs. There's also a lot of young guys that I look at all the time. I look at Alex Stupak and what he's done with **Empellón** and the intelligence that he brings to his situation. I look at contemporaries like Wylie [Dufresne] and **tw@-50**, and just, again, the intelligence that he brings to the table, the cerebral nature of business that he does. It's just refreshing sometimes when you speak to and see guys like that, being as successful as they are. And my goal is always to take what's mine. Take the things that fit and work for me."

CC: So you're many things: you're a chef and a businessman and a TV star. Do you get time in the kitchen?

"I do. I don't do it as much as I did. Because frankly, let's think about this: if I were working the pasta station, with all the things that I do ... I mean, just look at all the things I have on this board [indicates the white board on the wall], and these papers, and this nonsense, all the things that I think about all the time. They're little one-word things that mean nothing to you, but to me, [there] are huge plans attached to each one of these.

"Teaching someone how to captivate, how to nurture that experience for a guest, is much more important for me, than to be able to cook pasta, or make a piece of fish, right? I'm talking about an overarching goal. And everything is under the umbrella. So I'm clearly not the guy who can spend that time in the kitchen like I did. Even though I love it, it's just a different ... things evolve, passions evolve, things change. I have to use both sides of the brain at this point. And I'm talking about dropping money for the bottom line, and all these things that your normal chef inside of a kitchen doesn't have to worry about.

"But as a business owner, as an entrepreneur, as someone who is ambitious to a fault, those are the things I have to concern myself with as well. So it's not just the experience of creating the perfect pasta, but it's also the economics behind that pasta, and also, the emotions that pass to that customer eating the pasta, and the happiness of the employees eating that pasta and also, how does the design of that space work? And the mood, and the vibe, and the overall ambience of that room, as well as how it's being delivered to your table, and what's the front of house staff wearing, and what's their training like, and what shoes do they have and what color are their socks, and you know, all those basic things that every restaurant person has to deal with, but I try to deal with it in multiple locations. My goal is, in the next five, ten years, is to have an internationally respected hospitality program."

CC: Everybody always asks female chefs, "How do you balance work and family life? No one asks the men how they balance their work, their life, their families. You have two young children, right?"

"Two young kids. And by the way, there's nothing ... It's funny how life works, right? You work your ass off in life, in order to get to a point where you have kids, and then you realize, nothing else matters. You have kids?"

CC: I have two.

"Right, you have kids, and you realize, there's no place else in the world you'd rather be, at any point in time, than hanging out with those kids. Which is crazy. It's crazy!"

CC: Especially when you've dedicated so much of your life to these other pursuits.

"These other pursuits, and of course, I can't turn my back on them because I love them, I just don't love them equally. [Laughs] And that's the funny thing. Happiness with your kids and your family is suddenly the most important thing in the world to you."

CC: So how do you juggle the time?

"It's the toughest thing in the world. If I had answers, and if I had rights answers on this, I think I'd probably write a book on it. But the fact of the matter is, there's going to be disappointments. I'm going to disappoint those girls. I'm going to disappoint my wife. I'm going to disappoint myself. I'm going to disappoint my staff sometimes, because there's going to be times when I unplug the phone and walk away. They're going to get pissed off. And there's going to be times when I travel for two weeks, and I'm FaceTiming with my daughter, and she says, "Dada, how come you don't call us anymore? How come you're not home? That's heartbreaking sh!"". And I apologize for it beforehand, with my wife and my family, and with my kids all the time, which is the hardest thing in the world."

CC: This has turned into such a sad topic!

"But it's what it is. And you know what? I'm also good with the fact that I'm trying to create something for them. I'm also providing. This just happens to be my job.

"I sound like I'm a hit man, and I'm killing people. It's my job!"

"At the end of the day, I also am very passionate and I love what I do. I wouldn't change my job for anything else in the world. But sometimes there's gotta be a check-out, you know?"

CC: It's good for the kids anyway to see parents who are loving what they're doing and involved in it.

"[Not entirely convincingly] Yeah."

CC: It is!

"Years of therapy."

CC: It's better than seeing parents who come home at the end of the day saying, "I hate my job."

"Absolutely. I grew up with parents that were loving, and caring, but never loved what they did. They did what they did in order to provide. And I want to be able to provide, live a good life, and also be really proud of what I'm doing. Have THEM be proud, you know?"

"I went into my four-year-old's class the other day; she's in nursery school. I walked into this class, and I did a cooking demo. We made little ricotta dumplings and a stewed baby tomato stew, like a tomato sauce. And my four-year-old was like, "That's my Dada, that's my Dada." And I let me tell you something: that was the best thing in the world. You know, that's awesome! Best reviews I've ever gotten in my life, from those little kids."

CC: And they'll tell you the truth.

"They will tell you the truth! They don't like it, they don't like it. But I literally made two little dumplings for each one of those kids and they housed like five or six dumplings. I couldn't keep up, making these dumplings for these kids. That was awesome."

CC: So are your kids good eaters? Are they adventurous?

"They are, uh ... No. They're not. Not at all. [Laughs]"

CC: I was hoping you had a secret for me!

"No. I got nothing."

"You know what? I try to involve them in the process. And I notice that if they're involved, they're more willing to taste. That's all. And I'll ask questions, like, "What do you think about this? And what about this and what about that? Should we add this?" And she'll say, "No, it's this."

CC: Let's talk about TV, because I am obsessed with "Chopped." What was your first experience doing any TV?

"I did the regular "Today Show" stuff, and you know, local stuff cooking with people and all that kind of nonsense. I had a product line on the Home Shopping Network for a while."

CC: Did you? What was it?

"It was called "Scott Conant's Signature Creations." Whatever that means. [Editor's note: it was a line of cookware.] And I got comfortable in front of the camera doing stuff like that. And clearly failed miserably. [Laughs] At the time. And "Chopped" came along, and I did a show for a couple of seasons called "24 Hour Restaurant Battle," which um ... which ... I like television. I enjoy it, I really do. I like doing it. I don't watch it. If I watch TV, I watch ... I watched the Final Four over the weekend, I watch the Yankee game, I watch ESPN or something like that. I watch "Scooby Doo" now."

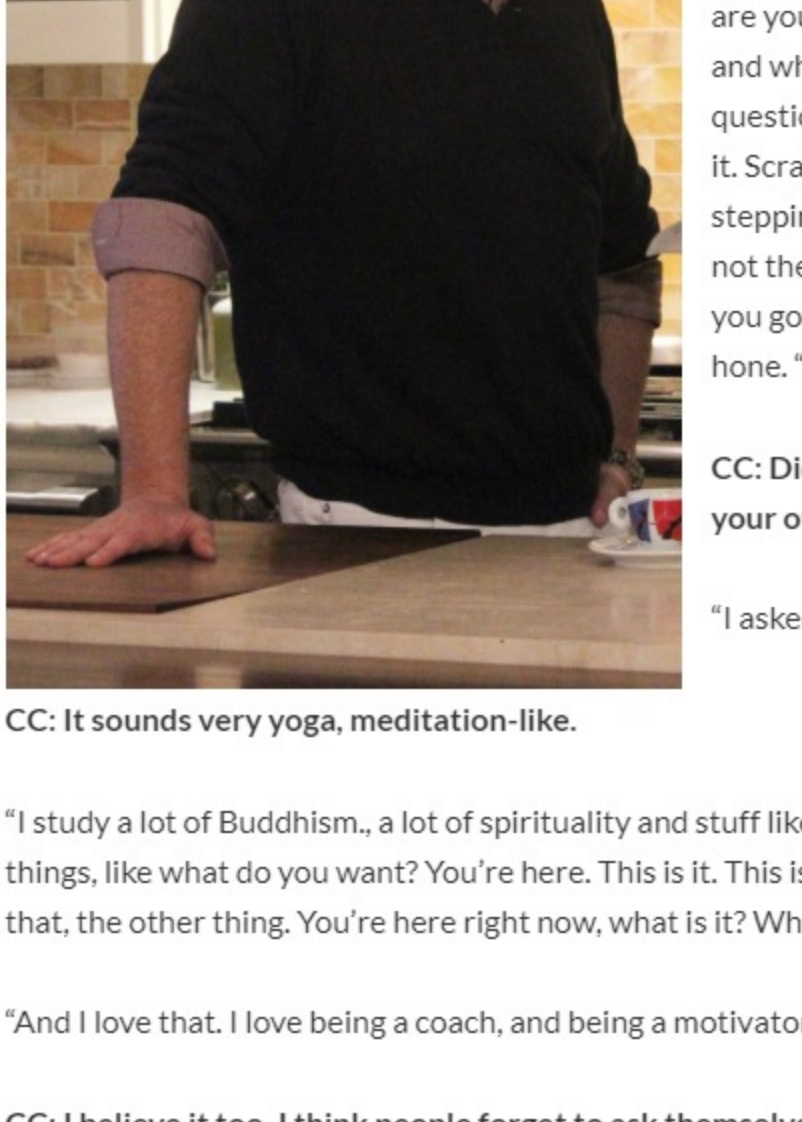
[We chat for a bit about kids shows, declaring our mutual affinity for "Phineas and Ferb," among others. I confess it's pretty funny to hear Scott Conant say, with enthusiasm, "I LOVE Curious George!"]

CC: Do the girls watch you on TV?

"No. Not at all."

CC: How come?

"I don't know. They're just not impressed. My daughter'll look up and go, "Yeah. It's Dada." And then, back to her thing."



CC: Now you brought this up earlier when you talked to [our video host] Cristina, but when you're interviewed, you're always asked why you're so mean on "Chopped." Why do you think people perceive you that way?

"What's the opposite of mean? Nice. So if you're not nice, they think you're mean. And for me, I don't want to be nice. I don't want to be mean, either. So I want to be respectful. Right? And I want to get the point across, and I want to be honest. So you're being honest, you're being respectful, you're getting your point across ... I don't sugarcoat things. I want people to understand what they've done right or what they've done wrong. And if I add niceties to it, that just isn't realistic."

"People want me to like ... I don't know what people want, to be honest with you. I don't spend my time -- [laughs] -- I don't waste my time trying to figure out what they want! I want to do what I want to do, and I want to make people happy while I'm doing it.

"I gotta tell you something -- other than maybe two people who've walked out of that place -- they may have not liked my decision, but they respected where it comes from. They can't not like the decision, but they're going to like me, because I'm going to be honest. I'm going to talk to them, and I'm going to speak from the heart."

"Now the edit, that's a different thing. There's such a thing as the unkind edit. And the unkind edit, I can't control that. All I can control is what I can control, and I'm going to let it go from there. You know, it's the Taoist practice: you do your work, and then, that's all you can do. The rest is in the universe's hands. I got nothin'. I'm just doing my work."

"And listen, I have fun. And that's the most important thing, it's a marketing and advertising platform for all the restaurants that I have. And I'll continue to do it, and I'll continue to grow and evolve."

CC: Do you like doing the "Chopped After Hours" show that you guys have on the web? That seems fun, you all look more relaxed.

"That's fun. You know, I always have a couple of drinks, which makes things go a little bit easier."

CC: That's why it looks like more fun!

"That's why everybody's like, "I never saw Scott have such a good time!" Well yeah first of all it's different, number one. Number two, I'm half in the bag. [Laughs]"

CC: That's your secret!

"It's the secret to life, I think. [Laughs]"

CC: You don't shoot those after a full day, do you?

"Oh yeah. It's a 20-minute thing. It's no big deal."

CC: Well the shooting schedule for the show's pretty intense.

"It's about ten, twelve hours. We get there at around 6:15, 6:20 in the morning, start shooting. We probably finish at about 6:30, 7:00, depending on the day."

CC: So what time do you have to eat your first strange item?

"Around eight. There's literally been ... I tell this story all the time. There's been 8 a.m., I'm still on coffee, or I'll have a green juice 'cause I know what I mean. [Laughs] And I'll have a plate of, like, duck testicles sitting in front of me."

CC: [Can't talk. Laughing too hard.]

"And where do you go with that? You know what I mean! Like, I'm on coffee and duck balls."

CC: For breakfast!

"For breakfast."

CC: Do you ever see them open up those baskets, and just go, "Oh, sh!""

"Yeah! All the time! Because people are like, they've gotta cook it, but we've gotta EAT it. [Laughs] There's three people in the world that eat that crap. And they're sitting at that table, with cameras around, so you see our faces. And we've gotta play it straight."

CC: Do you ever get mad at the people plotting the baskets?

"No. You know, every once in a while. The woman who does it, her name is Sara [Nahas]. I love her, she's wonderful. But I'll be like, "Sara, come on, you know. Come on. Durian and duck balls? Come on, help me out. Come on."

CC: Has anyone, after the show, expressed that they were angry at you?

"It's only happened once, and we talked it out. It's all good. Only once!"

CC: I think you guys always seem very respectful of the effort and the process and the art to it.

"Listen, there are times when I get pissed off at people, because either they're not dedicated, or they're missing the point. Well, why are you here? You came here, you put yourself in this situation, for us to dissect what they're doing. You're not ready to hear it? So we're upholding our end of the bargain, you're not upholding yours."

"So ask yourself why you're here. You want a TV show, you know what you're perfect, that this is going to make you a big star? Maybe. I've never seen it happen, but maybe. You don't know what I mean? Why are you here? Ask yourself that question and then come back to complain. Because I'm going to talk about what you did wrong. Whether or not you want to hear it is completely up to you. This all comes from a good place, trying to make you better. This isn't about me."

"Nobody wants good food here more than I do! 'Cause I've gotta eat it! [Laughs] It's in my best interest for you to be a phenomenal chef. It's in my best interest, because then I get to eat this food. Think about it! I don't think I want to take you down? Did you think I want terrible food in front of me? Absolutely not, I want this to be wonderful!"

CC: Did you ever get sick from anything you ate on the show?

"I never got sick. But there have been things I wouldn't eat. You know, like cross-contamination, a lot of scary, like, handling practices where I've been like, "I just can't, I can't eat this. And if this is what you do for a living? Maybe you should re-think it!"

"Those are tough things to hear, you know? And I understand, people get upset about it. But that's theirs, it's not mine. It comes from the right place."

CC: It sounds very yoga, meditation-like.

"I study a lot of Buddhism, a lot of spirituality and stuff like that. Ultimately it just boils down to some very simple things, like what do you want? You're here, this is it. This is your life. You're in it. There's no more future in this, that, the other thing. You're here right now, what is it? What do you want? Work towards it."

"And I love that. I love being a coach, and being a motivator. I actually believe this bulsh!"". I really do. [Laughs]"

CC: I believe it too. I think people forget to ask themselves that question a lot, and they just stumble through life.

"You know, it can't be that you're just jumping from this to that. "Oh okay, this is what I want, no this is what I want." You've gotta create the plan, and make a list of the things that you want and need, and all that stuff. That's it."

CC: So let's talk about food. In terms of food trends that are going on right now, are there any that you just find irritating?

"I don't do trends. I don't believe in trends, I believe that there's modern, and there's things that come and go, but I'm not about any of that stuff. This sounds like complete bullsh!"". But really, again I believe this: that for me it's about long-lasting appreciation. What's the difference between Lady Gaga and Marlon Brando? Right? What's the difference between Robin Thicke and Dean Martin? I know which side of the coin I want to be on."

CC: And as someone whose specialty is pasta, does the whole gluten-free thing drive you a little bit crazy?

"No, I mean ... the misunderstanding of gluten is what I think frustrates me more than anything. Because it's ... it's ... [laughs] I don't need to get into it, obviously ... "

CC: Well I want you to get into it. Someone has to say it.

"[Laughs] Ultimately gluten isn't necessarily bad for you, unless it is. [Laughs] You know what I mean."

CC: Yes!

"I think you would know that, but this idea that it's a healthier choice ... It's not organic, it's not diet food, and it's not all these kinds of things. I mean it's gluten, [if] it has no gluten, it may ultimately be easier to digest, but I don't know that to be the case, I mean, I eat pasta all the time. Clearly."

"But gluten-free options are necessary. I completely understand. But I just find it to be a wild cop-out for people to just say suddenly ... I mean, it's a marketing ploy more than anything else, let's not kid ourselves. And anybody who thinks that it isn't, you don't get it. It's the economics, it's the world that we live in. Figure it out."

"It's what it is. It's incredibly frustrating that everybody thinks that it's a healthier choice. But it's not, it's got nothing to do with that."

CC: Unless you have celiac disease.

"Exactly. That's what I'm referring to, exactly. Unless it's not a healthy choice for you."

CC: You're very active on social media. Do you enjoy it?

"I enjoy aspects of it. I mean, it used to be people would talk a lot of smack on Twitter, especially. And I used to re-tweet it and let it sort itself out. And then one day I just decided, you know what? Even if I did re-tweet it, it would affect me. Even if I did read it, and let it go, it would still affect me. It still had a negative consequence. So I just decided to say, you know what? I'm just going to block people. If anybody says anything remotely negative, they're done."

I always say, these are happy places for positive people. And if you want to be negative, there's plenty of places to be negative. You don't have to be negative with me, you don't have to do it on my page, so go, I own the page, it's my page. I don't like it? You're out. You need to say that you don't like certain dishes, and things like that, keep your comments to yourself. You're out, you're done. Don't follow me. It's fine. You don't like things I'm posting? Leave. Change the channel. The good news about social media is, you can block the channel."

CC: I think that's it. We covered a lot of stuff. Thanks so much, I really enjoyed interviewing you.

"You need to get out more often, clearly."

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