

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

October 2, 2009

Rock-Star Chefs

Top chefs are drawing crowds of screaming fans with live performances. Making jambalaya sandwiches in a 5,500-seat amphitheater.

By KATY MCLAUGHLIN

To prepare for his first live national tour this fall, Guy Fieri sought advice about living on the road from members of AC/DC ("Take care of yourself, man," was one band mate's counsel) and rocker Sammy Hagar, who recommended voice coaching. He commissioned a black, red and silver stage set that can shoot flames, specified in his contract that his dressing room must be stocked with Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and lectured his roadies about "not partying until the next town" on the tour bus, he says.



Mick Coulas

Mr. Fieri is not a rock-band frontman, a pop star or a rapper. He's a chef. His show will consist of him making things like jambalaya sandwiches at 21 concert venues around the country, in spaces with up to 5,500 seats.

Live performance is a booming business for celebrity chefs, who themselves are a thriving niche of the entertainment world, straddling television, publishing and retail and generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. For years, chefs have staged cooking demonstrations at food festivals around the country, often for charitable causes and usually free.

Adrienne Arsht Center
FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS OF MIAMI-DADE COUNTY



These days, top food personalities are charging audiences up to \$250 a ticket to watch them cook, hear them banter and, some of the time, eat their food. Speaker-booking agencies that specialize in top authors and former politicians are now promoting chefs. Some chefs are packing in crowds of thousands per live show.

"It's easily the most lucrative part of what I do," says chef Anthony Bourdain, who was paid for about 25 live appearances in the past year and plans to do 40 in the next year. He says the majority of his income now comes from live appearances, rather than his show on the Travel Channel, "No Reservations," or from sales of his books.

Fans see live performances as a way to cement relationships that are already fairly intense: Many celebrity chefs are on television several times a day and connect to their audiences through their Web sites, blogs, books and branded food products. For some fans, the live events are primarily a chance to see up close a personality they've watched on TV for years. Most of the cooking demonstrations don't even offer audience members a taste of the food.

Lisa Hechesky, a 36-year-old library associate in Nitro, W.Va., has spent more than \$1,000 on hotel stays and tickets to see chef Alton Brown perform six times. Mr. Brown is the host of the Food Network's food-science show, "Good Eats," and the commentator on "Iron Chef America." Each August for the past three years, Ms. Hechesky has gone to the Gaylord Opryland Hotel & Convention Center in Nashville, Tenn., and paid about \$300 for a package that includes a night's stay in the hotel and a cooking demonstration by Mr. Brown. At the most recent show, Mr. Brown demonstrated how to make a smoker out of a box, and made smoked trout.



Getty Images

Jacques Pepin, with Sissy Biggers, at the American Express Cook-Off in Aspen, Colo., last summer.

Ms. Hechesky says she once longed to go to culinary school, but never did; Mr. Brown's TV show, "Good Eats," has helped her learn more about food science and cooking techniques. The live show has also given her a chance to meet Mr. Brown in person. At a recent performance in Atlanta, she says, Mr. Brown told her he remembered her. Mr. Brown could not be reached for comment. In two

weeks, Ms. Hechesky will travel to Washington to see Mr. Brown perform at the Smithsonian, she says.

In the coming months, chefs Jacques Pepin, Eric Ripert and Mr. Bourdain, along with Food Network personalities such as Emeril Lagasse, will perform in a three-act "Celebrity Chefs Series" in Miami. The show was developed by the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, a venue that typically books performances by the Miami City Ballet and shows like "The Color Purple." Tickets cost \$25 to \$200, which buys a reception with the chefs and a taste of food made with their recipes but prepared by Johnson & Wales University culinary students and an instructor. The chefs' fees range from \$35,000 to \$50,000 per appearance, says the center's executive vice president, Scott Shiller.

In Washington, D.C., next month, Food Network stars like Paula Deen (of the show "Paula's Best Dishes,") Giada De Laurentiis (who stars on "Giada at Home") and Mr. Fieri (a winner of "The Next Food Network Star" and host of "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives") will stage one-hour cooking demonstrations in a 2,700-seat theater at the Metropolitan Cooking & Entertaining Show. Seats will cost \$45 to \$80; the ticket includes a pass to enter the Metropolitan show, where attendees can browse food stands.

Ms. Deen is among the biggest stars on the live performing circuit. Deeana Healy, of Monte Sereno, Calif., paid about \$2,000 last year to go on "Paula Cookin' at Sea," a cruise to Alaska organized by Greenville, S.C., travel agency CruiseOne. Ms. Healy's special wristband allowed her into areas of the ship where Ms. Deen attended cocktail parties, spoke on stage and signed cookbooks. Ms. Deen did little cooking during a demonstration, handing off the work to an assistant, Ms. Healy says, but adds that she didn't mind because she was there for Ms. Deen's personality, not a cooking course.

Ms. Deen says she often hands off the cooking to her husband or someone else on the stage so she can focus on having fun with the audience. "They can turn on the TV at least three times a day and watch me cook," she says.

Since getting to know Ms. Deen and her family on the cruise, "my heart aches when I watch [Ms. Deen's] show," Ms. Healy says. "I feel like I'm watching family."

Ms. Deen's live performance career took off in 2005, when more than 1,000 people paid \$350 each to spend a weekend at Paula Deen-related events at Opryland. Her agent, Barry Weiner of Artists Agency, says he was astonished at the event's success. Realizing that there was an audience for Ms. Deen's performances, he helped her launch "Paula Deen Live," a two-hour stage show that toured six cities in 2007. Ms. Deen is now planning a coming national tour.

Opryland spotted an opportunity as well. It has gone on to host events with celebrity chefs including Mr. Brown, Bobby Flay and Gina and Patrick Neely of the Food Network's "Down Home With the Neelys." Chefs who have appeared once or twice on the Food Network are paid around \$10,000 to \$15,000 for the events, says special-events director Ken Groneck. Top-line talent is paid \$75,000 to do a demonstration, host a "meet and greet," and sometimes prepare a dinner, he says.

Not all live gambits in the past have been hits. In its early years, the Food Network had a Food Network Live division devoted to staging performances for its chefs, but shut it doors in 2002 due to lack of interest in most of the channel's performers.

Promoters and chefs say they believe the new crop of performances will work because of ever-growing interest in celebrity chefs and because they have learned from past mistakes. Guy Fieri's tour is booked in the markets where he gets the highest ratings, such as Philadelphia and the Southeast, say Mr. Fieri's agents at William Morris Endeavor Entertainment.

Chefs say there can be pitfalls to cooking in front of a live audience. Last year at the South Beach Wine & Food Festival, production staff attached two microphone battery packs to the waistband of Ms. Deen's light, baggy pants. During her presentation, the elastic snapped and Ms. Deen's pants went crashing to her knees.

"I was a little embarrassed, but I just rolled with it," Ms. Deen says.

Andrew Zimmern, of the Travel Channel's "Bizarre Foods With Andrew Zimmern" show, says he once hosted an event at a trade show in Brussels where he was to make crab cakes. When he arrived, the only cooking equipment was a single burner with an 8-inch sauté pan.

"I don't want to sound like a food snob, but I don't want to put a substandard piece of food there and say 'I made that,' " says Mr. Zimmern, who scrapped the dish. He now irons out contractual language specifying the equipment, ingredients and assistance he requires at his live appearances.

Fans can be disappointed if the chef in person seems different from the television personality they have come to love. Debbi McLees, the manager of CruiseOne who put the Paula Deen cruise together, says that some audience members on the last cruise complained about Ms. Deen's bawdy humor.

"There were jokes I wouldn't even repeat to my husband," says Ms. McLees.

Ms. Deen says she is not aware of any offended audience members from the cruise.

"When I'm in an adult crowd, I love telling jokes. I don't do it when children are around and I don't use the "f" word," Ms. Deen says.

Other fans love it when chefs cut loose. Linda Sarris, 25-year-old culinary student, says she found it "amazing" and funny when Ms. Deen topped a bald audience member's head with whipped cream and licked it off at the New York City Wine & Food Festival last year.

Even for chefs with their own TV shows, live appearances can be an important revenue source. Citing confidentiality clauses in their contracts, most chefs declined to say how much they make from TV deals, but several industry insiders said that even top food talent rarely makes more than \$10,000 to \$20,000 per episode—far less than many big-name chefs make for a single speaking engagement.

Michael Smith, the Food Network's senior vice president of marketing, declined to say how much the network pays, though he says it is "significantly more" than in the decade after the network launched, in 1993, when chefs often appeared free. The network's strategy then was to sign well-known chefs who already had their own cookbooks and restaurants. Today, it often builds up little-known cooks with deals giving the network a piece of most ancillary activities, from product endorsements to cookbooks. Because revenue from live shows is still "relatively small," Food Network does not take a percentage those fees, Mr. Smith says—which makes live performing a particularly attractive prospect for chefs.

Mr. Fieri says he realized he could take his show on the road last February while performing for free at the South Beach Wine & Food Festival. When Mr. Fieri's blender malfunctioned, he improvised by stirring a frozen margarita vigorously with a pair of tongs—generating wild applause.

A team of William Morris talent agents attending Mr. Fieri's performance took notice. "People were standing on their chairs, screaming," says Michele Bernstein, an agent who usually works with acts such as Nine Inch Nails and Pearl Jam. Returning to her office, she began calling theater owners and event promoters.

Mr. Fieri's tour will start Nov. 17 in Lowell, Mass., and end a month later in Las Vegas. Average tickets will cost \$35 to \$40, though \$250 buys a seat on stage and tastes of the food Mr. Fieri cooks. Ms. Bernstein says the agency is working with other celebrity chef clients to find time for them to go on tour.

Last week, as Mr. Fieri gave a cooking demonstration at the Turning Stone Casino in Verona, N.Y., a fan threw a bra onto the stage. "I looked around and saw that the crowd went wild and I thought, 'Wow. This is rock 'n' roll,'" Mr. Fieri says.

Gimme Shellfish

Where to see chefs performing live in the coming months:



Getty Images
Emeril Lagasse

Jan. 9

Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, Miami

\$25-\$200; 305-949-6722

Mr. Lagasse will talk about his life and career and give a cooking demonstration. Sold-out VIP tickets include a reception with the chef and samples of food made by culinary students from Mr. Lagasse's recipes.