

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/services/site/premium/access-registered.intercept>

Fun and games

Playing with food nets honors for young Webcasters

By Rick Asa
Special to the Tribune

April 12, 2006

If whimsy and exuberance matter in your life, you'll want to know that locally produced Web site Spatulatta.com delivers both in abundance while teaching kids to cook and eat healthful food.

Where else, for example, can you learn that okra is not only nutritious and versatile, but naturally attaches to the face to make horns and other adornments?

The underlying message, that cooking and healthful food can be F-U-N, is embellished with a streaming video featuring co-host Isabella Gerasole, 10, demonstrating the finer points of okra facial attachment while guiding viewers through a recipe for authentic gumbo.

The innovative Web site, conceived by television producer Gaylon Emerzian, has been nominated for a prestigious James Beard Foundation Award for best Webcast--making Evanston residents Isabella and her sister, Olivia, 8, the youngest nominees in the history of the competition. The Webcast award was added for the first time this year.

The girls' dad, Vince Gerasole, coincidentally also was nominated for a Beard Foundation award in the best television food segment category. He is a features reporter at WBBM-TV in Chicago. His nomination is based on a submission tape that included coverage of an award-winning baker in Evanston, a review of the Aloha restaurant and a report on the various cultures that have contributed to Hawaiian cuisine and a review of the book "Everybody Loves Pizza" with a related segment on pizza in its various forms.

He plans on being at the award ceremony with his daughters.

"I haven't even thought about my own nomination, I'm so thrilled for the girls," he says. "I'm already proud of them for being kids who donate some of their gifts to charity and sell armbands for Katrina relief efforts and that's the most important thing, they're good kids. The nomination is icing on the cake."

Weekly adventures

Advertisement

verizonwireless

ONLY ONLINE

FREE

CAMERA PHONE

WITH NEW 2 YR ACTIVATION

JOIN IN



MOTOROLA U275

THERE'S ONLY ONE REASON TO CHOOSE A WIRELESS COMPANY

IT'S THE NETWORKSM

Every week, Spatulatta.com features five new video clips of recipes organized by cuisine, holiday or theme. A recent entry has an Easter theme featuring recipes for braided bread, a veggie nest, Easter egg sandwiches, a bunny salad and a living Easter basket that grows wheat grass. There also are links that teach kids basic skills like chopping, the names of cooking utensils, weights and measures, and craft projects such as making a tiny origami Hawaiian shirt that makes a dandy note card.

Olivia, who demonstrates the Easter basket, is clearly having fun with the dirt. "I like the messy parts, especially when I get to use my hands," she says. "Like when I made banana bonanza and the Irish soda bread. One time we had to reshoot the part when I had to crack an egg and missed the bowl completely. I picked it up and put it in the bowl with a splash. Miss Gaylon said that was OK."

Isabella says she likes having guest cooks on the show "because they come from all over and give us interesting recipes. I like the kid cooks because they have as much fun as we do and we also learn something."

Emerzian, a Chicago native, says the Web show was a natural outgrowth of her love of food and cooking. Having a husband from New Orleans who also loves to cook adds to her inspiration. "There's a kind of pride for the kids in making the food," she says. "And they find self-expression in it. I'm thrilled that kids 'get' Emeril as someone to admire. It's very gratifying that there's this expansion of the horizon on food and cooking." The Web site format, she adds, also is a natural at a time when television and computer programming are converging rapidly, especially for kids.

The site emphasizes what Emerzian calls the "farm-to-table" connection so that kids understand the origins of what they eat and can avoid the ever-growing disconnection from agriculture we all face in a processed food world.

"I'm one generation [away] from a farm" she says. "My father was raised on a ranch in California. I've heard stories of kids not knowing that carrots come out of the ground. We have to teach our kids everything they know, so if they don't see carrots coming out of the ground, how would they know? It's not discussed on television shows."

Along those lines, a project in the near future will have the co-hosts and other kids at a farmers market, where they can talk with the growers about their farms and methods.

Heidi Umbhau, Isabella and Olivia's mom, believes children are "gaining one of the most useful life skills they'll ever need. I think Spatulatta connects with kids on many levels. One, the kids see other kids cooking real food, which gives them the confidence to try it themselves. Two, they see Liv and Belle make mistakes sometimes. That's part of it. You drop a potato on the floor, no biggie, you just keep going--like real life."

Every Tuesday after the latest segments are shot, Umbhau said, the two families gather for a meal cooked by the girls. "I can't tell you how many times they have eaten something they wouldn't have touched if my husband or I had made it. Come on, kids eating gazpacho? It happened at our house."

Destiny beckons

The young co-hosts are thrilled to be going to New York in May for the awards ceremony.

"I'm very excited," Isabella says, "and if we win I'll be absolutely astounded and very happy, but I consider us winners already because we're the youngest nominees in the history of the award."

If they do win, Isabella plans to "definitely put it in my college application so I can get into a good college."

Olivia says she first heard the news from Isabella, but found it hard to fathom. "I was so excited and confused at the same time. When I actually believed my sister, we screamed for five minutes."

On their first trip to the Big Apple, the girls both want to visit Ellis Island and the Empire State Building, where, respectively, they can study how some of their dad's Italian ancestors arrived in America and see the spire from which King Kong swung in the classic movie.

Olivia would like to work part-time as a waitress in high school, then go on to become an actress and professional skater. Isabella, who once wanted to be a full-time waitress "way back in kindergarten," wants to be an author.

Umbhau says she doesn't know whether the girls aspire to be Webcasters in the future.

"I remember wanting to be Snow White when I was little and it turned out much differently," she says. "It'll be fun for us as parents to watch this whole process."

- - -

Local honors

In addition to the Gerasole family, many Chicago-area chefs, restaurateurs and journalists have earned nomination nods from the 2006 James Beard Foundation. The prestigious food awards, named for the late cookbook author and teacher, will be announced May 7 and 8 in New York. Here are the local nominees (in alphabetical order):

- Alinea, Best New Restaurant (owners, chef Grant Achatz and Nick Kokonas)
- Chef Rick Bayless and his wife, Deann Groen Bayless, best cookbook in "Food of the Americas" category for "Mexican Everyday"
- Chef Graham Elliot Bowles of Avenues at The Peninsula Hotel for Rising Star Chef of the Year
- Mark Caro of the Chicago Tribune for his story on the foie gras debate in the Chicago restaurant community, "Liver and Let Live," in the Newspaper Feature Writing About Restaurants and/or Chefs With or Without Recipes.
- Steve Dolinsky of WLS-Ch. 7 for best Television Food Segment, National or Local
- Everest for Outstanding Restaurant (Jean Joho, chef-owner)
- Carol Mighton Haddix, food editor of Good Eating, for best newspaper food section with a circulation of 300,000 and above
- Chef Shawn McClain of Spring for Best Chef: Midwest
- Richard Melman, of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, for Outstanding Restaurateur
- Chef Carrie Nahabedian of Naha for Best Chef: Midwest
- Spiaggia for Outstanding Restaurant (Levy Restaurants, owner; Tony Mantuano, chef)
- Chef Charlie Trotter, host of "The Kitchen Sessions with Charlie Trotter: Giradet" on PBS, for Best Television Food Show, National
- Tru restaurant for Outstanding Service Award (owners Richard Melman and chef-owners Rick

Tramonto and Gale Gand)

Copyright © 2006, [Chicago Tribune](#)