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March 11, 2008 Weekly

What You Don't Know About Rachael!

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Inside Rachael's

The private joys and secret dreams of America's favorite chef (and what she really thinks of all those tabloid rumors!)

Take one part high school cheerleader, one part unguarded girl-next-door, mix in a husky voice and a flair for turning out the meanest mac 'n' cheese this side of the Atlantic, and you pretty much have Rachael Ray in a nutshell. Not unlike those "yum-o" munchies the 39-year-old upstate New York native creates daily on *The Rachael Ray Show*, Rachael herself is made of average, everyday ingredients. "I'm a pound puppy," she quipped when an audience member asked about her academic credentials during a recent TV appearance. "I've got no papers." And yet the mix that combines to make up Rachael has also created daytime TV's fastest-rising star.

Rachael spent most of her formative years in the kitchen, helping and learning from her mother, Elsa, who worked as a food supervisor for a local restaurant chain. At one point, she began teaching cooking classes at an Albany, N.Y., gourmet shop, a gig that eventually led — through a series of fortunate coincidences — to several appearances on the *Today* show. Yet when Food Network execs approached Rachael in 2001 about doing her own show, she was convinced they had confused her with someone else. "I said, 'Listen, you're champagne; I'm beer out of the bottle. I clearly don't belong here. I'm not a chef — you've been duped,'" Rachael now remembers. "And I got up.



Rachael, relaxing here with her pet pit bull, Isaboo, hopes her show doesn't seem like TV. "I want it to feel like it's your neighbor, it's your kitchen," she says.

Styling: Steve Linn; Hair: Adam Oleszewski/Cosmo Outfit; Makeup: Stephen Lovinsky/Whitehouse; Photo: Rodgers & Cowan

World



"My husband is a lot like me," Rachael says of lawyer John Cusimano (right), when asked about whispers of marital strife. "He doesn't bruise easily."



And they said, 'No, no, no, stop. That's what we like. We don't want you to be a chef.'

A Recipe for Success

Over the years, there have been many contenders for the title of "the next Martha Stewart," but as Rachael proved by launching, ultimately, five Food Network shows, her magazine *Every Day with Rachael Ray* and, in fall 2006, her mega-hit self-titled talk show — not to mention writing 13 cookbooks — she's the one with the right ingredients. "My food, I have certain rules about it," Rachael says. "It has to be something you can get in a grocery store. No special equipment." And whereas Martha can seem distant, Rachael is anything but. "We're talkers in my family," she says. "We're very loud, talkative, volatile people. I got a big mouth."

That mouth, of course, has contributed heavily to her success, but she has been an entrepreneur almost from birth. During her high school days in Lake Luzerne, N.Y., the Ray family's middle child ran a gift basket business called "Delicious Liaisons." "She tends to be almost passionate to a fault," Rachael's younger brother Manny Ray, a karate instructor, says. "She's the hardest-working person I know." And older sister Maria Betar — whom Rachael describes as a "numbers-driven executive and a fabulous baker" — agrees: "Day one, we knew that she was just going somewhere and doing something. She's always risen to the top."

Rachael has said that on her shows, she tries to prove to America that "you do not have to be wealthy to lead a rich life." And she now has the bucks to put that theory to the test. In years past, Rachael admits, there were times when she could barely scrape together the \$550 she needed to pay the rent on the Adirondack cabin she shared with her mother (her parents divorced when she was 13), and occasionally, other family members. But this past January, this onetime struggler was able to purchase a 6.2-acre spread in the ultra-rich Hamptons for a cool \$2.9 million.

Grappling With Gossip

For Rachael, the combination of sudden wealth and fame has also yielded its share of problems. For one thing, it spawned a batch of nasty rumors about the state of her marriage, which the normally unflappable star once confessed "are really killing me." Rachael met lawyer John Cusimano, 40, at a party in 2001, and both agree it was love at first sight. They married in 2005, and, along with their pit bull,

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Isaboo, currently split their time between an apartment in New York City's Greenwich Village and that old Adirondack cabin, which Rachael bought outright when the money started rolling in. John now runs Rachael's production company, but that, too, once became tabloid fodder, with one magazine declaring that "billionaire" Rachael was about to lose half her fortune in a pending divorce. "Both are sadly, grotesquely not true," Rachael responded at the time. (Other sources have since speculated that Rachael's real income is around \$10 million per year.)

Insisting there's nothing behind the hurtful gossip, Rachael notes, "John and I are happily, blissfully married. I love him desperately." And besides, she has joked, "I would never be dumb enough to give up free legal advice, a rock star, a great cook and a handsome guy, at that."

In their private time, Rachael recently told *People*, she and her husband are pretty much like any other married couple. "We listen to music, pour a glass of wine and watch *Law & Order*." And John elaborated: "It's fun to come home after a hard day's work and just cook dinner. The place I'm happiest is curled up in bed with Rachael and the puppy." The two are also, it turns out, hopeless romantics. Back when they were dating, John, who moonlights as the lead singer for the rock band The Cringe, wrote a song for Rachael called "Burn," which became the group's biggest hit to date. "It's not about her cooking," he explained, but about their passionate feelings for each other. And Rachael confesses, "I have our entire relationship saved on my phone. Sixteen messages between meeting and getting married. I resave them every 21 days."

Blissful as their union may be, however, one thing Rachael says is not in the cards at the moment is starting a family. "I have no time to be

a proper parent to a dog. I think it would be irresponsible for me to have a human child — I wouldn't be able to give it enough time."

Elements of Style

With all that cheese constantly bubbling on her broiler, an area where Rachael's success could cause another sort of problem is around her waistline — if she were weight-obsessed, that is.

"I like food, I eat and I'm a size 6," she has said. "I don't care about being a zero — I get dressed and then I avoid looking in any reflective surface for the rest of the day. I'm a modest person. I like to have as much coverage as possible. And I never look down in the shower."

"We want [Rachael] to embrace her figure,"

The Rachael Ray Show's wardrobe stylist Jane Harrison Fox explains.

"And she does. She likes to eat, and she knows she's just not going to change that. That doesn't mean that she's in love with her figure. It's more like, 'Hey, this is who I am.'"

And, Fox adds, "I know college guys think she's really cute. There's something really appealing about someone who has a little meat on her bones." To make room for subtle



To stay fit, Rachael says, "I still do calisthenics like I did in the fourth grade. And when I get sweaty, I just leave."

weight fluctuations, Rachael simply says, "I buy jeans with stretch. Everything I have has stretch in it."

Claiming she hasn't known her weight since she was 12 years old, the celebrity chef also notes, "I have enough pressure. I don't care about any fashion enough to give up food." So while stylist Fox might want to see her client in clingy, curve-conscious fare, Rachael often refuses to wear it. In the show's first season, she temporarily caved, sporting Diane von Furstenberg wrap dresses and Prada heels — a deliberate departure from the soccer mom look she'd embraced on the Food Network. But this year, Rachael just wants to be comfy — meaning, for the most part, dark, slim-cut jeans, simple knit tops and ballet flats.

Reaping the Rewards

People who work with Rachael often speak of her strong loyalty, which has yielded staffs full of real friends at both her network and cable shows. And although busier by the minute — with several new cookware lines that have recently debuted, plus her endorsement deals with Nabisco crackers and Dunkin' Donuts — Rachael doesn't miss an opportunity to chill out with pals and appreciate her good fortune. "My life," she says, "has been a very happy, wonderful accident that I didn't and couldn't have planned."

Her advice to other young women who are reaching for a dream? "Take any and every opportunity that comes your way," she says. "No matter how surprising the idea may be to you — with the exception of the XXX industry, that is."

For Rachael, recent opportunities have led to the fulfillment of some of her own fantasies — like being able to hire one of her TV favorites, Valerie Bertinelli, as a part-time correspondent for her show. She has also started "giving back," founding the nonprofit Yum-o! Organization, currently aligned with Bill Clinton in the fight against diabetes and childhood obesity. About a year ago, the self-described "burger flipper and Chatty Cathy" actually found herself in rolled-up sleeves, making turkey Bolognese alongside the former president of the United States.

As Rachael herself likes to say, "How cool is that?"



Rachael's Mac 'n' Cheese 'n' Burgers

Serves 4

- 1 lb. cavatappi (hollow corkscrew pasta) or penne
- 1 Tbsp. EVOO (extra-virgin olive oil), once around the pan
- 1 lb. ground beef sirloin
- 3 to 4 Tbsp. grated onion and juice (½ small)
- 2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce
- salt and black pepper, to taste
- 4 Tbsp. (½ stick) butter, cut into pieces
- 3 Tbsp. flour
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 2 cups whole milk
- 1 Tbsp. Dijon mustard
- 2 cups shredded Cheddar cheese
- ¼ cup chopped dill pickles, for garnish (optional)
- 2 plum tomatoes, seeded and diced (optional)

1 Bring a pot of water to a boil. Salt liberally, add the pasta and cook until al dente.

2 While the pasta works, heat a nonstick skillet with the EVOO over medium-high heat. Add the beef and cook until

brown, breaking it up into bite-size pieces with a wooden spoon. Add the grated onion and juice, Worcestershire sauce, salt and pepper to the skillet and combine.

3 While the meat browns, heat a saucepot over medium to medium-high heat. Add the butter and, when it melts, whisk in the flour. Cook it for a minute, then whisk in the stock and milk, and season with salt and pepper. Bring the sauce to a bubble, then cook for a few minutes to thicken it up. Stir in the mustard, then add the cheese a few handfuls at a time, stirring in a figure-eight motion as it melts into the sauce. Adjust the salt and pepper.

4 Drain the pasta, then return it to the hot pasta pot along with the beef and cheese sauce. Stir to combine the mac 'n' cheese 'n' burger, adjust the seasoning and serve in shallow bowls garnished with chopped pickles and tomatoes, if you like.

Each serving: About 1,128 calories, 57g protein, 98g carbohydrate, 56g fat (29g saturated), 3g fiber, 185mg cholesterol, 1,389mg sodium

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