

Hosting During the Holidays

We enlisted the epicurean expertise of Gail Simmons for her tips on hosting a fab holiday fete

Words by Vanessa Pascale • Photo credit: Tina Rupp (courtesy of Gail Simmons)

Most recognized as a regular judge on *Top Chef* and host of its spin-off *Top Chef: Just Desserts*, Gail Simmons is very familiar with creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere that not only lures in family and friends but millions of viewers every week. In addition to her lovely presence, Gail brings with her a wealth of culinary knowledge and experience—having studied at New York's Institute of Culinary Education and apprenticing at Le Cirque and Vong.

The hostess with the mostest was impressed by the contestants on *Top Chef: Just Desserts*, season 2, which aired over the summer. "I think they really upped the ante this year, not only is the caliber of skill really extraordinary but because of that, we were then able to give them these really remarkable challenges—much less about plated, simple desserts, and about really creating architectural wonders that happen to be made of sugar and chocolate," Gail said. Season 9 of *Top Chef: Texas* premiered November 2nd. "It was a super fun season to shoot. We shot all summer long in Texas and the chefs were just unbelievable. I'm excited for everyone to see it," said Gail excitedly.

Gail's amazing journey in the world of food is chronicled in her memoir, "Talking with My Mouth Full: My Life As a Professional Eater"—available February 7th. "What I do in the food world, 15 years ago wasn't even a job and if you told me then what I'd be doing now I wouldn't have believed you, so it's how my life sort of paralleled the trajectory of the food world." This culinary crusader traverses the globe for her career—sampling the world's diverse fare. For the last eight years, Gail has been a frequent fixture at Miami's South Beach Wine & Food Festival. When she's in SoBe, her appetite is sated by fare from Michy's, Sra. Martinez, Michael's Genuine and Casa Tua. Traveling weeks, and sometimes months, at a time can be taxing, especially when she's juggling that with her position at *Food & Wine* magazine and a



slew of events spanning the country, but Gail assured me this is the best part about her job. "I love travel and I love exploring new places and cities and finding out what's good to eat in each of them. It's the most exciting thing. I think every experience you learn from and you just keep amalgamating into your repertoire of knowledge and understanding of the world."

Gail, who is originally from Canada, resides in New York City—though she often returns to the north during the holidays. This year she is ready to sit back, relax and enjoy The Big Apple with family and friends. "Holiday time here is always really beautiful and festive; it's so easy to get caught up in it. I love seeing all the windows every year and skating in Central Park. The lights in New York are always so beautiful," she beamed. I asked Gail for her recommendations for entertaining this holiday and here's what she said.

What is a great and festive option to serve at a holiday party of 8-10 guests?

Soups, stews and braises—it in itself can be a meal if you make something hearty and delicious. I make a kale, sausage and white bean stew; it's really hearty and delicious. Then all you really need is a big salad,

maybe some simple vegetables, good fresh rustic country bread and you have a really great meal and it feels festive and special.

What do you normally cook for the holidays?

I love making big roasts, brisket or braised meat short ribs... and my mother's latkes; they're my absolute favorite things in the world. I always make those. Roast turkey, lots of root vegetables, potatoes, sweet potatoes—I'm all about those really comforting foods over the holidays.

What is the best holiday drink to serve?

Champagne is my favorite drink all year round. You can always make it festive with some fresh cranberries, or a sugar cube at the bottom—adds a little extra fizz and always looks beautiful. Another great drink that's easy to serve is hot apple cider.

What is your go-to appetizer?

I always like to pass a bunch of appetizers—a couple of veggie options, and sometimes I'll have roast beef and endive spears, deviled eggs. I do a spicy deviled egg with Sriracha, an Asian version of deviled eggs, that's always a hit. Little pizzettas that are really easy to make, a sheet of puff pastry, cut out little squares, put bleu cheese and figs, or tomato, mozzarella and a little fresh basil.

What is your favorite holiday dessert?

I'm sort of a cookie freak. I love holiday cookies, especially the chocolate peppermint cookies I always get on the holidays a friend of mine bakes. They're my favorite thing in the world. I also love for Hanukkah the traditional dessert, jelly donuts. And while that used to be something that was lowbrow, making your own jelly donuts is really, really fun and can be so delicious, especially when you use really great quality, fresh ingredients and they're piping hot out of the oil—one of my favorite things to eat. **ML**