

Southern Comfort


JoAnna Garcia Swisher dishes on family, food, and Florida living

WORDS BY VANESSA PASCALE · PHOTO CREDIT DANILO HESS

It's late January and I am seated in the only quiet corner of The Crosby Bar & Terrace restaurant at a table that affords views of the private garden and breadth of the almost-at-capacity dining room. The banquettes, art, and globular pendant light fixtures are splashed in a mélange of vibrant hues—lavenders, chartreuse, cerulean, amber, burnt orange... The ambiance is warm. Inviting.

Less than two minutes after I arrive, in walk JoAnna Garcia Swisher and her husband, professional baseball player Nick Swisher. Nick and “Jo” emanate a magnetic, sunny, in sync vibe. Nick has only come by to say hello—a gesture I feel speaks volumes about the type of husband he is: obliging, supportive—

then leaves us to our interview. As the din of the breakfast-rush crowd swirls around us, we place our order: coffee (for JoAnna) and tea (for me). JoAnna's long, Little Mermaid-red hair is casually tossed into a side part. She's dressed in a loose, white V-neck tee, a black leather jacket, and dark jeans. A tiny evil eye hangs on one of the dainty gold necklaces that encircle her neck and her stunning diamond engagement ring is joined by a collection of rose gold rings. The doe-eyed, natural beauty doesn't seem to have a stitch of makeup on aside from a few swipes of mascara to accentuate her big green eyes. And there's a glow about her that I'd largely credit to her steadfast smile.



In Manhattan for the weekend, JoAnna and Nick left daughters, Emme, 3, and Sailor, 7-months-old, home in Tampa with their parents and as luck would have it, Sailor, who has never been away from mommy, got sick. Most of their family live close by, so the girls literally have a village of loved ones to shower them with TLC—and dually give JoAnna peace of mind. Having grown up in Tampa (her father came over from Cuba and set up his OB/GYN practice here), she knows firsthand that it's an idyllic place to raise a family. And though her acting career occasionally takes her away from the Sunshine State (she doesn't mind commuting), there are no plans to ever leave. When the actress needs to be in L.A. for work, she can retreat to their new home there (their previous L.A. residence was in the hills), outfitted with an orchard, garden, and alfresco pizza oven, which JoAnna is eager to entertain family and friends at.

But the festivities will have to wait as she is in the midst of making press rounds for her new movie *Fist Fight*, in theaters February 17th. Shot in Atlanta, Georgia, JoAnna was serendipitously sent the script while Nick was playing baseball for the Atlanta Braves. She flew to Los Angeles, met with first-time director Richie Keen and Charlie Day, and landed the role of Maggie. As the 9-months pregnant wife of Andy Campbell (played by Charlie), Maggie is trying to hold it all together as her husband deals with a few troubling issues of his own, the major one being a fellow teacher (played by Ice Cube) wanting to fight him after school. "I'm due any second. My daughter is in a talent show and my husband is part of her act. So I'm like: A. You gotta be at this talent show. B. You gotta be at the birth. And C. You can't lose your job. Most importantly, *please* don't lose your job," she playfully pleads. As always, JoAnna brings lovable charm to her role as the sweet, supportive wife, while Charlie Day, Jillian Bell, Tracy Morgan—whose hilarious, jaw-dropping brand of humor is as much characterized by the comedic timing of their expressions as the lines they deliver—do what they do best: make us laugh hysterically. Of course, a fight goes down. And it's good. "The fight scene is epic... Both of them did not come out unscathed," she laughs.

Now that JoAnna has a family, she's more particular about the roles she takes. Attracted to lighthearted, fun projects, this ballsy comedy was right up her alley. And with Richie and Charlie attached to it, she was sold. "I thought, Oh my gosh, this would be a dream come true working with this director that is literally all smiles and love and Charlie, who is just a genius. He's also all smiles, but he's also so funny," her thoughts after auditioning with the guys. With not many women on set, they were spoiled rotten, she tells me.

She was taken great care of, especially during her bouts of morning sickness (Nick and she conceived Sailor halfway through the filming of the movie). “Tracy Morgan, I fell madly in love with him. Ice Cube is the dreamiest. Charlie is the sweetest, most loving co-star you could ever imagine. They were just great people. Jillian Bell, I just laugh at everything she says.” I saw an early screening of the film and it’s hilarious. If you need a good laugh, this is a must-see. “I’ve been lucky to have a career in comedy. It’s nice to make people laugh. It’s also nice to laugh when you’re at work, so that whole experience was awesome.”

As a child JoAnna aspired to be a tennis star, but when she no longer saw a career in it, she took a page from her next-door neighbor’s book and enrolled in improv classes. After a few classes, she auditioned for a play, got the part, and from that landed agents. “I just really loved performing in that moment. At that time, Florida was a hot bed for our industry and there was a lot of opportunity and so with Disney, Nickelodeon, and all of that around I was able to do what I love, but also maintain a real sense of normalcy, which was super important to my parents.” JoAnna commuted from Tampa to Orlando to work on some of the 90’s hottest TV shows, including *Clarissa Explains it All* and *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* (1994-1996).

Before the kids were born, JoAnna, Nick, and a couple of their best friends went to Harry Potter World and took a stroll down memory lane while there. “It butts up against what was Nickelodeon Studios. I don’t normally do this, but Nick will walk down memory lane all the time... He’s like, ‘C’mon, I want to take you where it all began for you.’ I was, strangely, so emotional about it. It smelled the same way and has this memory of just an awesome time in my life. But my dressing room that I had there is a broom closet now,” she laughs. “It’s kinda like a reality check. Relax, Jo. Chill out. But I had a moment.”

JoAnna took a break from acting to attend Florida State University and have some fun. It wasn’t long though before the sports psychology major realized how much she missed acting. “I knew there was nothing that I loved as much as that.” So she left school and moved to Los Angeles. The day she arrived, she landed a role in a made for TV movie in North Carolina. Upon her return to L.A., she secured an agent and ended up on *Party of Five* a couple of weeks later. “It sort of happened really quickly

for me. Obviously, my career has been very steadily built, but I think that immediately I understood I made the right decision.” And if her daughters want to follow in her footsteps, she’ll allow it on one condition: that they act on Nickelodeon or the Disney channel, since the networks provided such a great environment for her growing up.

Emme is just now starting to understand what mommy does for a living. When JoAnna’s 3-year-old was asked the question, she replied, “She goes out to L.A. and sits.” (The narrative was posted to her Instagram.) “As offended as I was by that, I was actually sitting in my trailer for 6 hours that day waiting. The schedule was really backed up. Well, she’s *actually* not wrong,” she says with a big smile, then laughs.

A few weeks ago, JoAnna and her family returned to the set of ABC’s hit series *Once Upon A Time* in Canada to reprise her role as Ariel and get the “street cred she deserves” from her daughter, who is all about Disney princesses. “Emme came alive,” she explains animatedly. “One of our A.D.s took her into my set, where I have all of my treasures, and he allowed her to pick a little treasure. Her eyes were so big. And meeting Princess Jasmine... She was literally feeding Emme cake. She got to meet Jafar, Aladdin, Captain Hook... I said, ‘Nick, I could cry.’ He’s like, ‘I’m going to cry.’ He was with her. It was just this moment where this whole fantasy world that they see in cartoons came alive in the most real way for my daughter. I feel like a really cool mom that I could give her this really special moment.” She takes a sip of her coffee. The smile never leaves her face.

Playing Ariel, who she characterizes as “tough as nails,” requires her to work with a stunt double. But JoAnna’s ready to tackle these stunts herself. “I’m like, ‘Oh, I got this!’ and then I slowly start sinking in my Ariel tail. And they’re like, ‘You might die.’ And I’m like, ‘No, but I got it. It’s fine.’” She lets out a laugh. “In my mind, I’m super graceful and I’m killing it as a mermaid, but maybe in reality it doesn’t read that way... I’m going to start taking some stunt classes so I can.”

Every anecdote JoAnna shares is fraught with intense adulation for her co-stars and loved ones. If you believe Audrey Hepburn’s musings to be true: “You can tell more about a person by what he says about others than you can by what others say about him,” then you’d immediately realize that you were in the presence of a genuine class act after

HAPPINESS IS...

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conversing with JoAnna. As generous with her time as she is with the compliments, JoAnna makes it a point to have a conversation with me. (Interviews are often one-sided.) We discover that we both have Orlando, New York City, and Los Angeles in common as well as a shared affinity for L.A. restaurant Bossa Nova and Ina Garten. Talk about the Hamptons-based culinary superstar naturally segues into New York living. “When we lived in New York, it was some of the best times of our lives. We were here for four years when Nick was with the Yankees... I love coming here and the food is amazing. And being Cuban, it’s all about the food and drink for me.”

Relishing delicious fare and libations with friends and family, whether it be in a restaurant or the comfort of their home, is a significant part of the Swisher’s lifestyle. From the moment she walked into their new L.A. home, she could envision having people over to kick off their shoes and relax while she cooks for them. Since their parents are so close by (hers even live in the same neighborhood), they all eat together practically every night. “I just love the open door to a home. There’s always some delicious food cooking or in the fridge. A bottle of wine is always open. Kids are always running around. To me, that’s happiness. I think that’s why I love Florida so much. That’s what Florida is for us. We always have our family around us. And then in L.A., we have our friends that are our family.” The night before our interview, JoAnna and Nick sat down with Chef Josh Capon, who is an old friend of theirs, at his restaurant Lure Fishbar. The prolific chef-restaurateur “fed them silly” and sent JoAnna home with a few tips on using her new pizza oven. JoAnna, like many of her “Suzy Homemaker friends,” loves to cook—so much that she flirts with the idea of attending culinary school. “I have that desire to always feed,” she says passionately, “so I’m looking forward to the new house in L.A. to do that.”

She especially loves feeding Sailor homemade baby food. “It sounds so bougey and I’m not *that* Hollywood mom, but I really enjoy cooking baby food for her. The other day, Nick came home and was like, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Making my own organic vegetable stock.’ He’s like, ‘Ohmygod. You’re so annoying.’ I was like, ‘I know! I’m so annoying!’” She wails with laughter. “But I’m so proud of myself. If I was that girl that Instagrammed food, I would have totally thrown that into the universe.” JoAnna deems herself a private person, who often considers sharing more with the world, but “gets scared.”

In addition to acting and cooking, JoAnna channels her creativity into interior design and writing. “I’ve been writing [scripts and short stories] a lot. I’ve never gotten the confidence to let anybody read it [except for Nick and close friends]. I will be inspired by something and I will sit down and just write something. But again, I’m really private about those deep, dark thoughts. One day I will.” This year, her goal is to be more confident about sharing her writing, which is partly autobiographical and partly coming-of-age. “If you know me for a second, I could be a little bit of a hot mess. I can find myself in interesting situations. I like a good cocktail and I had a lot of fun in my 20s, so I’ve written a lot of those kind of things.” This sparks her feelings on raising two daughters. “I want them to know that they have my full support. I think in life you sorta get what you put out there, and it doesn’t mean you’re void of the trials and tribulations. Life is a rollercoaster, but if you can look at your toughest moments in life and find blessings in those things in time, that’s a pretty awesome way to live your life. I want them to be tough and strong and know that they can weather any storm... that they can specifically design whatever they want out of their life and get it,” she says thoughtfully.

Being tough is the trait she’s most proud to possess. I find this out when I ask for a single word to describe herself. “I feel like there’s not much I can’t get through.” What one word would Nick use to describe you? I ask. She suggests that I ask him myself, then guesses: loyal or loving. The happily married couple met through a mutual friend, she tells me. Initially, she was not interested in dating an athlete. “When I came here to do *Gossip Girl*, Nick had just started playing for the Yankees a few months prior. He asked me to come to a game and we talked till 4 a.m. I was like, Gosh, he’s so positive and sunny and happy. And it’s so genuine. It’s so rare you meet a successful young man that loves his job and is grateful for it.” A week into dating, Nick told JoAnna he only wanted to date her, he even changed his phone number so that she was the only girl who had it. Now *that* is commitment. Ten months after meeting they were engaged, and six months after that, in December 2010, they were married. She says she knew he was The One after he met her family. Her dad and Nick are actually the best of friends. “I really do value his opinion. And it’s not that we don’t fight or anything like that. We are a very real couple, but I admire him tremendously and how he walks through life. I feel really lucky to be married to him, raise kids with him, and do life with him. He’s a good guy,” JoAnna tells me, noting



FINDING SILVER LININGS

"I was super nervous about doing the show [*Gossip Girl*] because I didn't perceive myself to be that cool, so when they asked me to come do it, a show that was my heart and soul had gotten cancelled called *Privileged*, it was on for 18 episodes. The story of that whole journey was just so incredible. Had it not gotten cancelled, I wouldn't have been on *Gossip Girl* and I wouldn't have met Nick. Like I said, some of the greatest disappointments, you've got to look at the positives. It was such a fun show to do. Being in New York City and doing a show that was such a pop culture phenomenon, falling in love with Nick, and working with Chase Crawford [who played her love interest on the show], it's like, how much better could my summer have been? It was the perfect way to turn 30."

that their relationship is built on friendship and mutual admiration.

On the subject of husbands, I mention the photo of Steve Howey (who played her TV husband on *Reba* from 2001-2007) and her that appeared on her Instagram last fall captioned: My first hubs #vanandcheyenneforever. “Oh my gosh, love Steve Howey,” she gushes. JoAnna and her *Reba* cast mates remain very close to this day, and even participated in her wedding years after the show ended. Chris Rich (her TV dad) married the Swishers, while Reba McEntire (her TV mom) and Melissa Peterman (her TV stepmom) stood by JoAnna’s side as bridesmaids. “Reba’s always checking in, making sure I’m OK. I’m going to see Chris Rich next week. He and his wife are very good cooks. They feed me and give me good food and wine and it just makes me feel like home.”

Growing up with a strong role model like Reba has certainly influenced who JoAnna is today. “To see a woman like Reba, who is so accomplished, so successful be so loving and so kind. She taught me that you can be a strong, assertive woman, but could be loving, elegant, graceful, and kind. She’s been through a lot in her life and is still finding the silver lining. Sort of what I was saying about the girls.” Every day she meets people who love and watch *Reba* and it fills her with pride. “There’s not an episode I don’t remember. Very safe and loving, special time in my life. I look forward to having that again, that sense of family and a show that lasts that long and can still make people smile,” says JoAnna, who does watch the reruns when they’re on.

Since *Reba*, JoAnna has starred in a few TV series that showed promise but didn’t make it passed the one year mark: *Privileged*, *Better with You*, *Animal Practice*, *The Astronaut Wives Club*. On the latter, she played real-life astronaut’s wife, Betty Grissom, and regards it as one of the best experiences of her career. “I was just so proud to be able to do that. Those kinda jobs for me are what keeps me doing this.” JoAnna recently appeared in a few episodes of FOX’s *Pitch* as a journalist/Mark-Paul Gosselaar’s character’s ex-wife. Shooting began for her just five weeks after giving birth to Sailor –making this a very vulnerable time in her life, so she was elated that everyone was so loving and welcoming when she came onboard. “Mark-Paul, does it get any dreamier than him? Literally, women stop me and say, ‘What was it like to kiss him?’ And I was like, ‘It’s everything you ever dreamed of,’” she giggles. “Poor Nick, right?

He’s like, ‘He’s a good guy. I’ll let it slide.’ Nick really liked him, so that was a good thing.”

As I get to know JoAnna, I get to know Nick through JoAnna’s eyes and the stories he is weaved into. Even though I only witnessed a brief interaction between the two, their complementary love was palpable. The other day, a girlfriend of mine and I were flipping through channels on the TV. *Reba* was on. Since we’re both fans of the show, I put it on and my friend says, “I imagine JoAnna to be like Cheyenne: bubbly, funny, fun.” Ohmygosh! JoAnna is very much like her! I tell her. Which my friend is happy to hear since we’ve all met stars who fall short when compared to their lovable characters on screen. JoAnna’s positive energy is so refreshing that I compliment her on it. Of course, she returns the flattery, as this is her endearing nature, and I adore her even more for it. After an hour, I have asked every question I want to. And though she mentions that she could talk all day, I wrap up the interview. While primping for our photo, I point out that I knew I had something in my teeth –a tea leaf speck. “Do you have anything in your teeth? I swear to God I didn’t see it,” she assures me. “I would’ve told you, by the way. And if there was anything in your nose, I would’ve told you, too.” *Now that’s the kind of people I want in my life. Thanks, Jo.*

JoAnna waves Nick over. He’s finishing up at a table across the room. “How’s it going over here, guys?” he asks.

“Nick, if there’s one word to describe me, what would you use?” JoAnna asks.

“Interesting,” he instantly responds. JoAnna and I repeat the adjective.

“Why interesting?” I ask.

“I’ve never met anybody like her before,” he replies.

“I was like, ‘Loyal. Loving.’ C’mon, interesting?” JoAnna jokingly nudges.

Nick laughs. “Amazing! Amazing! Epic!”

“OK, I’ll take epic. Can we use epic?” JoAnna laughs. **ML**

Keep up with JoAnna on Twitter: @JoAnnaLGarcia, Instagram: @JoGarciaSwisher, and www.facebook.com/JoAnnaGarciaSwisher

WE WANT MORE!

What do you think fans would be surprised to find out about you?

"I cuss like a sailor, which I can't believe you haven't heard me cuss yet. I'm still trying to be well-behaved. We're just meeting. I'm outgoing and I really like meeting new people but I am really private in a weird way. Like I always think, I'd love to share this with the world, but then I get scared to. Does that make sense?"

Like your cooking?

"Yes! Yeah. I'm fiercely protective and I think people would probably imagine I'm happy and easygoing 'cause that's usually what people see, but I could cut a bitch—there you go!—if you hurt someone I love. I'm not afraid to stand up for someone that I love. I'm fierce like that. Especially when Nick was playing ball and I would run into those jerky fans that say the worst things in the world. I'd have no problem telling them, 'Yo, I'm his wife and I'm two rows away from you. Watch your back.' Especially if I had Emme and they're saying terrible things about their father. 'Cool your jets, man! There's a kid here who loves him a lot.' Nick calls it my Cuban salsa. He is like, 'That is real.' I'm like, 'Yeah, babe. I got you.'"

What are you watching on TV?

"*The Crown*, *The Night Manager*, which I thought was fantastic. *Stranger Things*.

Obviously, *The Bachelor*. I look forward to every new season and I love the whole journey. Nick and I will turn it on and just have a good laugh. I love the Bourne movies and *Lethal Weapon*. I like action films much more than anything else. Nick is like, 'Let's go see the new romantic comedy.' Yeah, but there's a Bourne out. I got the whole Bourne library of all the movies for Christmas."

Is there a role that you haven't played that you want to play?

"Yes, of course. I fancy myself in private that I would be an excellent spy and that I could kick some ass when I need to. I could be a great spy. I just don't know that people would think of me for those roles. I don't know what I gotta do to put the vibe out that I would be a really good spy."

Who are you listening to?

"I'm a huge country music fan. I love Bruno Mars. I love One Direction. Nick's like, 'It's almost creepy.' *No*, it's definitely creepy," she laughs. "I love singer-songwriters. I love Ray LaMontagne. Adele. Justin Timberlake. I love music that makes you feel, that's why I love country music. I'm taking Nick to Stagecoach, the country music festival in Palm Springs. He's definitely going to see a side of me that he's never seen, like my cutoff jean shorts. I'm definitely going to wear an American flag and my cowboy boots and drink beer."