



DOWN HOME WITH THE NEELYS

BY JENNIFER CHANDLER
PHOTO COURTESY OF FOOD NETWORK

Pat and Gina Neely were stars before they even knew it.

The hosts of Food Network's hit show *Down Home with Neelys* weren't looking for fame when they were discovered. They were just trying to promote their family business, Neely's Bar-B-Que.

"We had gotten a last minute call that Jamie and Bobby Deen wanted to visit Neely's when they were filming *Road Tasted* in Nashville," explains Pat, "Normally, I wouldn't have been there since my brother Tony runs that restaurant. But he had plans to be out of town so Gina and I went there to fill in."

"We were filming the last show of the season," adds Mark Schneider, executive producer of *Road Tasted* and *Down Home with the Neelys*

Above: Pat and Gina are joined in the kitchen by Pat's brothers Gaelin, Tony and Mark.

along with Gordon Elliott, "After we finished, Gina comes out and started joking with Jamie about 'taking care of his woman.' His wife Brooke was eight months pregnant at the time. As they were all joking around, I said to myself 'Wait a minute, I think I have found our next talent.'"

What Schneider found that day was a dynamic couple who had a passion for food. High school sweethearts that were reunited at their ten-year high school reunion, Pat and Gina generously allow us to have a sneak peek into their lives as well as their kitchen.

"Three years ago if you had asked me if I was going to have a TV show, I would have said no way," says Pat, "Mark and Gordon saw something in us we had not seen."

Pat and Gina are all about family and food. They own and operate one of Memphis' best barbeque joints with Pat's brothers. "I think what attracted Mark and Gordon was the dynamics of our family.

It's truly special nowadays to see a family that both works together as well as gets together for downtime," explains Gina.

The Neely brothers opened their first restaurant in 1988 in downtown Memphis. Twenty years later, they have two locations in Memphis, one in Nashville as well as several concession stands in the FedEx Forum.

What you see on their new show, which by the way became the highest-rated series debut in the five-year history of Food Network's popular "In the Kitchen" weekend programming, is the real deal. "What you see on TV is pretty much a typical day in our home," Pat and Gina both agree.

Down Home with the Neelys is first and foremost a show about family. When describing the Neelys, Schneider recounts Paula Deen's philosophy "It's all about family, fun and food." Good times with family and friends are the central part of this fun-loving couple's life so it was natural that family would be an integral part of Pat and Gina's show. Almost every episode includes a visit from a family member or a close friend. In fact, the premier show left no one out and featured the entire extended Neely family sitting down to Sunday Supper.

"Our show has a totally different format than what's been on TV," explains Pat. In addition to regularly having family and friends as guests, the show features interviews that allow you to really get to know Pat and Gina, as well as the stories behind their family recipes. "We sit down individually to do the interviews," adds Pat, "We often get the same question but we don't get to hear what each other said until the episode is complete." Gina believes that couples will really relate to their show when they see the dynamics of her and Pat's relationship.

In addition to their passion for family and food, Pat and Gina are thoroughly committed to their community. Named Restaurateur of the Year by the Memphis Restaurant Association last year, Pat joined

a select group of mid-South restaurateurs who have been recognized for going above and beyond for the foodservice industry.

Pat's list of volunteer positions is impressive. Currently, immediate past chairman of the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau Board and on the board of directors of the Memphis Regional Chamber, he has also served on the boards of The Memphis Rock-n-Soul Museum, The Memphis Restaurant Association and The Food Bank.

Gina is a member of the Memphis Restaurant Association, on the steering committee for The Women's Empowerment Summit for the Memphis Housing Authority and on the PTSA of Cordova High School. She is also a member of The Dreamers Club for the National Civil Rights Museum and an active member at Cummings Street Missionary Baptist Church where she serves in the Hospitality and Greeters ministries.

In addition to their board positions, the Neelys also give back to the community in some entrepreneurial ways. "Ever since the Grizzlies came to Memphis, we have bought 30 tickets for every home game to give to children that otherwise would never have attended an NBA game," explains Gina.

Always humble, Pat emphasizes that "Gina and I feel very strongly that this show is much bigger than just us or Neely's Bar-B-Que. This is a great thing for Memphis and we want to bring good publicity to this city that is so dear to us."

In so many ways the Neelys are similar to Paula Deen and her sons. Both Neely's Bar-B-Que and The Lady and Sons are true family run businesses. What you see on camera is simply these people being their own charismatic selves. Their authentic love of their families and their passion for good food is what shines.

"The sky's the limit for the Neelys," Schneider concludes, "They are real and genuine. That magic comes through on TV and people connect with that."

Anyone who has ever met Pat and Gina already knew they were stars. Now it's time for the rest of the world to meet this fun-loving and great cookin' couple from Memphis, Tennessee.

BEHIND THE SCENES

BY MELISSA PETERSEN

Working as a prep cook behind the scenes on *Down Home with the Neelys*, I've been amazed at how hard-working and genuine Pat and Gina are. They don't know me as the publisher of *Edible Memphis*, only as someone who gets their materials ready before they cook. The days are long—and yet Pat and Gina are always kind, supportive and funny. I recently ran in to Gina; she recognized me, commented how much better I look without flour in my hair—and gave me a warm hug. Memphis is lucky to be represented by these two smart, beautiful, warm people.

When asked why she got into the food business, **Jennifer Chandler** always quickly responds, "Because I love to eat!" Jennifer's love of good food has led her down an interesting—and tasty—road over the past 15 years. Once a restaurateur, Jennifer is now a contributing food writer to several magazines both locally and nationwide. She is a food stylist and the author of *Simply Salads*.

***Down Home with the Neelys* airs on Food Network at 10:00 AM on Saturdays.**