

And they lived happily ever after...

Q&A

an interview with
Pat and Gina Neely

Memphis's own stars on the Food Network and authors of a new Southern cookbook



SHELLY STRAZIS



Sweet and Spicy Slaw



Anyone who knows anything about Memphis barbecue has heard of Neely's Bar-B-Que. For more than 20 years, Neely's has been one of the most popular spots in the mid-South for barbecue aficionados.

Thanks to the Food Network, co-owners and couple Pat and Gina Neely now share the secrets behind their favorite dishes and their passion for food, family and fun on their top-rated cooking show, "Down Home with the Neelys." Filmed in their Memphis home surrounded by family and friends, the show now airs seven days a week on the Food Network. Their first cookbook, *Down Home with the Neelys*, was released in May.

INTERVIEW BY JENNIFER CHANDLER

How did you get in the food business?

Pat: We have been in the food business all our lives. It started back when I was in my mother's kitchen with four hungry brothers. I really fell in love with the business back in high school. I worked in several restaurants, including my uncle's barbecue place...and have never wanted to leave.

Gina: For me, it started when I was a child and watching my great grandmother cook. It's all about Sunday meals and family traditions.

Pat: Gina, I think it's more that you met this wonderful guy in the food business...

In her introduction, Paula Deen mentioned that you weren't looking for TV, but it found you. How did you get "discovered?"

Gina: We were doing "Road Tasted" with Bobby and Jamie Deen and their

producer Mark Schneider saw our chemistry together. After we finished filming, he said, "Do you mind if I give you a call?" Of course, we thought nothing would happen but then he invited us to do some shows with Paula Deen. The next thing we knew we were doing a pilot and the Food Network's Bob Tuschman was coming to Memphis to meet with us.

Pat: Three years ago if you had asked me if I was going to have a TV show, I would have said no way. Mark and Gordon Elliott, the show's executive producer, saw something in us we had not seen.

So what's it like working with Paula Deen?

Gina: Very easy and very natural. It's like cooking with your grandma and having a ball.

Pat: She makes you feel so comfortable. The Deens and the Neelys have so much

in common. It's just like being with family when we are with her.

Any other star chefs you have worked with? Who have been the most fun?

Gina: We have worked with Giada De Laurentiis, Bobby Flay, Guy Fieri, Alton Brown. They are all great but for me Paula is my favorite. She's real laid back and there is no pressure to perform with her.

Pat: Paula is number one on both our lists. We like working with everyone...the Food Network is like one big family. But I have to say Guy is a lot of fun. He's always joking around.

What's it like being a judge on "The Next Food Network Star?"

Gina: I can remember feeling how they feel when we first started. Because of that I'm probably too easy.

Pat: It's a lot of fun. As Gina said, we can relate to their nervousness. But you



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can almost look and tell who has it and can make it.

On your show, do you just cook barbecue?

Gina: We cook everything. We are known for barbecue, but on our show we cook Southern dishes that relate to our family.

Pat: We are so much more than just barbecue. We do a lot of grilling but it's mostly just great Southern comfort food.

You have a new grilling book out, what makes it unique?

Gina: The recipes are mostly from our early TV shows and our family. But what makes the book unique is that it is told in both our voices. Before each recipe there is a story that connects you to us.

Pat: Our cookbook is what you see on "Down Home with the Neelys," good home cooking with many of the recipes coming from our relatives. We are most



proud that it is not your traditional cookbook. People can jump right into our lives with stories and photos of when we met, got married, had children, etcetera. If you buy our book, Pat and Gina can be with you every hour of the day...not just that 30 minutes a day when our show airs.

Pat, what are your top three grilling tips?

Pat: First, be prepared and start early when grilling meats. Meat tastes better if you can season and marinate it the day before. Second, take your time and let it cook "low and slow." And last, make your patio comfortable so you are never too far away from your grill. I have a table with a

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cold drink set up when I start. If you have to keep running inside something might burn.

What is your favorite thing to grill?

Pat: My pork spare ribs. It takes so much precision and it makes the most beautiful masterpiece.

Gina, what is your favorite cooking tip?

Gina: Invest in a food processor. It saves oodles of time for chopping and making rubs and sauces.

What is your go-to menu for summer entertaining?

Gina: Pat's pork spare ribs for sure. For sides I often serve my grilled romaine lettuce (which by the way makes a great conversation piece), grilled corn and baked potatoes.

Pat: I like to add a little extra variety too. Maybe some chicken, both wet and dry, for an option in case a guest doesn't eat pork. I also like to make our five bean salad...it's a beautiful side and you never know if someone doesn't eat meat.

You cook together on TV but who really does the cooking at home?

Gina: We both cook. What you see on TV is what you get...we are both in the kitchen.

Pat: We love to be in the kitchen together...it's a great aphrodisiac!

Pat, what is your favorite dish Gina makes?

Pat: Her braised cabbage and carrots. It's one of the first things she made for me when we were dating. And if she adds her turkey meatloaf, it's all over!

Gina, what is your favorite dish Pat makes?

Gina: Without a doubt, his pork chop stew. In the book it's called Deep-Fried Pork Chops and Quick Vegetable Stew.

You seem to always be having a mess of folks over for dinner, any entertaining advice?

Gina: When entertaining try to prepare as much as you can before your guests arrive. We want to be out with our guests, not back in the kitchen.

Pat: You want your guests to feel that they are at home. We have everyone make their own plates.

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Gina: Also, always serve a house cocktail.

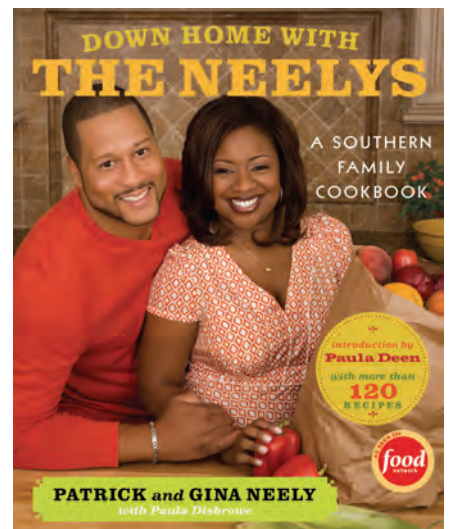
What ingredients are always in your fridge?

Gina: Heavy cream, plenty of produce, butter and eggs.

Family...it is a word always associated with you. Any words of wisdom on what keeps a busy family together?

Gina: Whenever Pat and I have our downtime, we always try to take time and get together with our family and friends. It doesn't have to be fancy. When you are not working, you should enjoy yourself.

Pat: It's all about balance. Because we work so much together, work is not discussed during family time. It's a rule that's worked beautifully for 21 years.



luck•e you.

Memphis is getting more attention on the Food Network. You served on the Memphis Convention and Visitors Bureau board, so you must think that it is important to the city.

Gina: I think it is good for people to see Memphis has so much to offer. Memphis is a great city to live in and raise a family...and people need to know that.

Pat: Memphis is getting great exposure. People are finally recognizing that some of the best food in the country was founded right here in the South in home kitchens. Gina and I didn't go to culinary school and that's OK. I'd rather be known as a great cook than as a fancy French chef any day. ☺

Down Home with the Neelys (Alfred A. Knopf) is available in bookstores everywhere.