

I'm Not Jealous of David Rocco.

In a quiet corner of the Avenue Bar in Toronto's Four Seasons Hotel, David Rocco, the host of the popular cooking and lifestyle show *David Rocco's Dolce Vita*, opens up to Emily Saso about his fabulously sensational life of exotic travel, delicious food and glamorous fame. Not that she's jealous or anything.

ES: Would you like to order anything before we start?

DR: Just some sparkling water, thanks. I'm not very hungry.

ES: What would you normally eat here on an empty stomach?

DR: Actually, I come here quite often. The burgers are my wife's Nina and my junk food indulgence. I know it may seem a bit odd that burgers at the Four Seasons are our junk food, but they're so good!

ES: Would you ever order a veggie burger?

DR: What am I, a wimp?

ES: I'm vegan, actually.

DR: [silence]

ES: Ahem. Given that you were born in the GTA and now split your time between Toronto and Florence, where is home?

DR: I do feel a bit confused about that. Toronto's my home because I was born here; my roots are here. But when I'm in Italy filming *Dolce Vita* I'm so engrossed in the world there. You almost have two lives. It's really bizarre. Basically, when I'm in any city, I try and really live it.

ES: Your job involves cooking, eating and living the good life in one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Not that I envy you, but how the heck did you get so lucky?

DR: It was sheer determination that got Nina and I into this. There was no way someone was going to say 'No, it can't be done' or 'What are you doing in this business?' And in part, it's because we're kids of immigrants. And I don't think we take 'no' for an answer. At least Nina and I don't. I think we're similar to our parents who came over and busted their asses. Immigrants like

them built Toronto. They paved the roads, literally. I find that very inspiring.

ES: Tell me more about your parents.

DR: My dad is a hairdresser and so is my mom. My dad's from Pozzuoli and my mom comes from a small town in Foggia. She came over in 1948 or '49, when she was six. My dad came when he was 17 or 18. They met in Toronto in the Yonge and Bloor area.

ES: Did your mother instill a love of Italian cuisine in you?

DR: Yeah, I'm a good mama's boy. She makes a great pasta with mozzarella, eggplant and tomato sauce. She puts it in the oven and it gets nice and crispy. It's so good! And she makes amazing eggplant *parmigiana*. I don't even bother making it myself!

For a boy growing up, there wasn't much expected from me in the kitchen, which was a bonus. It was just like 'go.' My parents didn't really care if I cooked or not. I just loved to eat. My mom used to work on Saturdays, and my brother and sister couldn't care less about cooking so I would cook. Looking back now, there was no supervision and I was seven, and I had the four elements going...

ES: Yikes! What was the first dish you mastered?

DR: It was probably something simple—pasta with tuna, (*pasta al tonno*). Sometimes I would add cherry tomatoes, sometimes tomato sauce.

ES: What's your philosophy in the kitchen?

DR: My tag line is 'I'm not a chef, I'm Italian.' The whole 'chef' word in Italy is so seldom used. Here, chefs are sometimes put on pedestals. Meanwhile, some of the best so-called 'chefs' in Italy,

Photos courtesy of Rocco's Entertainment

Photos courtesy of Rick and Teri Enten



▲ Blue ocean, beautiful weather, delicious food... Nothing to be jealous of. Absolutely nothing.

one in Sicily in particular, rarely have formal training, yet they make some of the best meals I've ever had in my life.

Simple and basic is my cooking style. Fresh ingredients. But you can still get good results if you can't make it fresh. On my Web site I have this section on the five essential ingredients. It's amazing that with olive oil, garlic, *peperoncini*, tuna, penne or spaghetti you can actually make 25 different dishes. It's like alchemy!

"I love food so much that if I didn't stay active I'd weight 300 pounds!"

ES: What is the biggest difference between Italian cooking and Italian-Canadian cooking?

DR: Italian-Canadians are limited with the quality of ingredients. Our tomatoes come in from California. They've been sitting on a truck for four weeks. We get tomatoes in January. It doesn't make sense. Italian-Canadians are just as passionate. But if the food's better you're just going to be a bit more passionate.

ES: Italian aside, what varieties of food do you love to cook and eat?

DR: I love Indian, Japanese, Korean... I love to eat. I love all types of food. In terms of what I love to cook, I've made a few curry risottos, just for fun. I've cooked a bit of Thai; I enjoy doing that. But if it's something that I really want I'll leave it up to the experts.

ES: I just happened to notice that you're in great shape. How do you stay fit with so much food around all the time?

DR: I like to run. I've done a few half marathons. I love soccer. I love food so much that if I didn't stay active I'd weight 300 pounds!

ES: Your wife Nina is the show's executive producer. Is it difficult to separate love and work?

DR: Actually, it's funny you ask that because we got married here at the Four Seasons in 1994. Full circle, you know? I'm lucky that I work with her. It's tough because the work is intense, but we are a formidable team. At the end of the day you have to have passion and love.

People often only see the glamour of it. Now don't get me wrong, it is glamorous—I'm on TV, I'm recognized. But there's so much going on behind the scenes that people don't see. There's so much work, so many long hours.

ES: What do you have in your fridge right now? I'm picturing foie gras, and some sort of tiny chicken.

DR: I don't really have a lot in there most of the time. If I want tuna, I have to go buy it that day. Because of where we live, and our proximity to great shops, Nina and I shop daily to cook daily. I have my basic pantry stocked with things like dried pasta, garlic, olive oil, tuna, canned legumes, tomato puree and plum tomatoes.

ES: Why do we love to watch you and other "celebrity" chefs cook so much?

DR: I think it's because, fundamentally, people are connected to food. As kids we used to see our mothers cook so watching it on TV brings back warm and fuzzy feelings. There's so much crap on TV right now, but shows like ours offer simple television that can even teach you a few things.

Food

ES: If you weren't working in TV, what would you be doing?

DR: Well, I went to York University in the early '90s and I have a BA in Economics, which I'm using a lot! Truthfully, I wasn't driven in school in terms of attending class daily. I didn't 'skip,' I was entrepreneurial. I started selling t-shirts at York's Osgoode Hall Law School and the Faculty of Ed. We made really good money. I guess that's my Neapolitan background coming through!

My Mom still says 'One son is a lawyer, one son is a teacher, my other son is an economist,' and I'm like, 'Ma, no.' She doesn't say it much now though because I can prove to her that I have a real job!

Really though, if I wasn't in TV, I think I'd still be working in food. I'd love to have a little coffee bar on the beach that I can open when I want, close when I want, serve who I want.

ES: What's coming up from David Rocco, David Rocco?

DR: We just launched our CD soundtrack nationally with Universal Music and it's available in HMVs and Chapters across Canada. I'm working on my lifestyle cookbook, which will be out next year. And we just launched our olive wood line—David Rocco's Dolce Vita Olive Wood, which is available at cookery shops and on our Web site. We're also shooting season four of *Dolce Vita* in the fall and it will air in early 2008.

ES: What's it like to be famous?

DR: It's interesting, never dull! *Dolce Vita* airs in over 120 countries so it's probably dubbed in more than six languages. Years ago I was in Nicaragua doing another show called *Don't Forget Your Passport*. I was watching TV in my hotel room and I saw someone on the screen that looked familiar—it was me speaking with this old man's voice in Spanish! It just freaked me out, seeing myself with a different voice. Surreal.

I sometimes get credit as the face of the series, but it's so collaborative. Nina makes a lot of the smart business moves. We have an amazing team working with us. It's like a little dysfunctional family! But we genuinely love each other. The work is so intense—you literally eat, breathe and sleep it for three months. But it's worth it. Hopefully our show inspires people to eat well, connect with family, friends, and makes people feel good. Right now I'm enjoying it.

ES: That's great. And by the way, I'm not jealous of your fantastic life. I'm just really happy for your success.

DR: Thank you.

ES: Not jealous at all.

DR: [silence]

Watch David Rocco's *Dolce Vita* on TLN Sundays at 7 p.m. and Thursdays at 9:30 p.m. Catch it on Food Network Canada Sundays at 10:30 a.m. and Wednesdays at 1 p.m. 

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