

In Their Own Words

David Page of Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives

by Jill Lewis on July 15, 2009



Jill Lewis / Heavy Table

Local Food Network fanatics may be able to tell you the name of Giada De Laurentiis's baby or the average amount of butter that Paula Deen uses in a half-hour program, but many would be surprised to learn that one of the network's most-watched programs, Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives, is produced in their home state. The program comes to us courtesy of Plymouth-based production company Page Productions and is the brainchild of company founder and president David Page. The broadcast-news veteran, who, along with host Guy Fieri, introduces viewers to some of the best homestyle food across the country, recently sat down with the Heavy Table to discuss the ins and outs of food-television production — and reveal Guy's recommended substitute for fennel.

You worked in news production for many years. How you make the transition to food programming?

Storytelling is storytelling. I was at NBC News and ABC News for maybe 15 years. I spent a lot of time overseas. I pretty much ran NBC's coverage of the fall of communism, walked through the Berlin Wall when it opened. Came back to the US, got into show production. I developed the weekend *Today* show. You are in this business as whatever you are in that moment, so earlier in my career I was an investigative reporter. Then I was a foreign producer. Then I was a morning show producer — I went to ABC and ended up producing *Good Morning America*, which has a lot of food and lifestyle to it.

The bottom line is that, at the risk of sounding critical of network news, it was no longer the business that I wanted to be in. There were a few of us who were kind of old guys who thought, "If you're going to do something, do it right." And the

network news business that I and my wife, who was NBC's chief content lawyer, both cared deeply about had pretty much gone away. And we got an opportunity to move here and rebrand a home shopping channel as ShopNBC. It seemed like fun so we did it and it turned out not to be our favorite thing.

But we have a daughter who is now 16. We kind of were liking it out here, so we figured, "Why don't we try to make the production company thing work?" And one of first things I did was I called up [Al] Roker. He used to work for me on the weekend *Today* show and I said: "Do you got any work?" Because he's got his own production company, Roker Productions, and they were doing a lot of Food Network stuff, so it was really where I got my feet wet and learned to do food television. And I did a fair amount of work for Al and eventually ended up in a position where the Food Network was willing to take a chance on me as a production company.

So was *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives* your first "dive" into Food Network?

As a company of my own. When I was working with Al, in addition to doing segments for his show *Roker on the Road*, his company engaged my company to produce a couple of hours for the Food Network that were essentially pass-throughs. We produced them entirely. I didn't have a staff, produced them pretty much turnkey and gave them to Al to pass onto the Food Network. As a result, the network was aware that I was able to produce programming. Any network is reticent to do business with an untested entity. But I had done a food show for them at an annual festival that takes place in Branson, MO. And I had done an hour for them on, of all things, diners with Al. With a lot of thanks to Al for having gotten me to the food side, I started pitching the Food Network a lot of things, which they kept turning down until this happened.

Walk me through the birth of *DD&D*.

Basically, I continued to call an executive at the Food Network and say: "Hey, I want to pitch you something." She'd say OK because she was a nice lady. And I'd tell her stuff and she'd say, "Um, no thanks." One day I'm the phone with her and she's almost getting exasperated because I think she wanted to help me. And she said, "Don't you have anything else about diners?" So I said, "Oh yeah! There's this thing I've been developing a while called *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*."

I, in fact, had just made the name up out of thin air in response to her question. And it was a Thursday or Friday and she said: "Well, we have a development meeting on Tuesday. Could you get me a one sheet on Monday?" I said, "Absolutely!" And then I spent the entire weekend calling restaurants all over the country. Delivered a one-sheet on Monday that was the show that eventually became the special that they purchased, never, I think, seeing it as a pilot. There was no conversation about the possibility of it turning into a series. But when it ran it did very well.



Courtesy of Page Productions

When Food Network commissioned it, I said, “Well, do you want to look for a host?” and they said, “Well, yeah, but we think we have this guy we’ve been trying to figure out what to do with him in prime time, if he can do prime time.” I said, “Who?” They said “Guy Fieri.” And I said, “What’s a Guy Fieri?” And they said that he won *The Next Food Network Star* contest and I did not let on that I wasn’t really sure that that contest existed.

And I went to the website and I looked him up and I saw this spiky-haired guy in shorts and I went, “Oh my God, I’m dead.” ‘Cause I had never seen him on television and I thought, “What are they doing to me?” And then we were going to shoot a one-hour special and I couldn’t get a hold of him on the phone. We have a summer house on the Jersey shore and he finally called me back as I was walking into a market.

So my first conversation with him was, “Hey, can I call you back? I’m walking into the fish market to buy dinner.” First thing he said to me was, “Well, what are you making?” And I said, “I’m making cioppino.” And he said, “Well, what are you going to use for fennel?” And I said, “Well, I don’t know because I can’t find any fresh. There’s nothing on the island so I guess I’ll use fennel seed.” He said, “That won’t work. Here’s what you do. Go get some Sambuca. It’s the same flavor profile.” So I went home. I don’t know if I called him before or after the cioppino. I think it was after because it was really good. And we started talking and then he said to me, “You know, how much time do you need?” And I said, “Well, what days do you have?” And he sent me his calendar and I said, “I’ll take them all.” And we went out and shot the special.

How long did that take to shoot?

We produced the whole thing, the best I can recall, over a period of a couple of months. We moved it pretty fast. In fact, I had most of it done before we even shot the last act because that was going to be in California and we left that for last, but we turned it pretty quick. The special aired in November, the show got picked up January 15th-ish and we actually put the first episode on the air April 27. Either 21st or 27th. I mean, we were slamming. And thank God they love it, so we keep cranking out new episodes. We’re renewed for quite a while down the road.

When did you get the first feedback that this was going to be big?

We got feedback within the next week that it had done very well. But I don't think the network was yet certain they wanted to do anything with us because I think they were looking at some other vehicles for Guy for prime time. But the numbers were quite good. I think it's possible that, quite frankly, some other things they were looking out turned out to be disappointing when they looked at pilots, I'm not sure. And Guy very strongly wanted to do this. He had fallen in love with it. Guy and I had, I hate to use this term, but we had bonded. You know, it's not like a normal talent-producer relationship. He's more like a brother.



Courtesy of Page Productions

Is he still working at his restaurants?

He still owns five restaurants. The guy is very busy. We're very careful – only with structure can there be creativity. So at this point, the infrastructure of producing the show is like a machine. Only with a well-coordinated research process, shooting process, and planning process can it be as painless as possible for him to get the most work done in the smallest amount of time without worrying about the mechanical details. We want Guy going in there and just being Guy, reacting with no concerns about how we're setting things up. The staff here really knows what they're doing.

When you plan a stretch of episodes, are you shooting it in the order of the episodes or are you doing a segment here that will be in one, and next is a segment in another episode?

We will plan a trip to a given geographical location, generally based around a city. In each of those locations the intent is to visit seven restaurants. When we're on the road, it's two full crews: two camera guys, two sound guys, two production assistants, two producers, as well as the driver who takes care of the car. So what we'll do is send the crews in several days ahead of Guy. Each crew will shoot a full day at each of their locations. All or most of the close-up shots, the beauty shots, a lot of the atmosphere of the place, and it gives the producer and crew the opportunity to, what I say, smell the place. Get a feel for it, because we're very, very good in the research department, but still you can be surprised. And to be candid, we have gotten to town and canceled places because the key to the show is that they have to meet that bar.

But logistically, the crews will shoot ahead of time. Guy will then come in and do his visit to each of these restaurants,

which is half a day at a time. He'll do two restaurants a day for three days and one restaurant either on the day he arrives or the day he leaves, which is plenty of time for him to do everything we need to do. And then after he's done, that leaves a half-day for a crew to pick up anything, you know, if we caught an audible in the field, if Guy said: "Hey I'd like to do that instead of this." And that amount of shooting is surprisingly high for a show like this, but we really take all the time it needs to shoot every step and every process, make sure we have all the beauty shots we need, make sure we have spent enough time getting the personality, the characters, so it's pretty intensive. Guy's amazing. Guy's able to walk into a place, strike up a relationship, a friendship. Guy just loves hanging out with and cooking with other chefs.

But I do want to talk about the food bar. Because the rule that I am very proud of is that Guy and I both agreed from the beginning, if you'll pardon my French, there's no bullshit. If he tastes something and likes it, he likes it. If he tastes something and he doesn't like it, he doesn't like it. And by the same token, every place we go has to make real food and it has to be good enough. I say that as a positive; not good enough, just getting by.

This has to be handmade food. If it's hamburgers, it better be handmade hamburgers. It better be done from scratch. It better be made right. And it better be good. And more than that, the whole place has to be like that. It's not like we want to walk into a joint that has 75 percent frozen Sysco pre-prepared product, but they make two specials a week that will knock you on your butt. That's not good enough. We just booked seven places in Houston. I was talking with the researcher today; he looked at 80 joints to get seven. That's not unusual for us. The reality is we're incredibly discerning about what it takes to get on the air and the first thing it has to have is real food because that's the soul of the show.