

## In Their Own Words

# David Page on Producing Food TV in Minnesota — and The Nook

by Jill Lewis on July 16, 2009



Courtesy of Page Productions

*Native New Yorker David Page has found Minnesota to be the perfect location to produce his highly rated Food Network show Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives. In part two of the Heavy Table's interview with David ([read part one here](#)), he talks about the care that goes into creating "real" reality TV, why cable TV is the source of quality programming, and his local favorite restaurants.*

### **What is the percentage of restaurants that come in from viewer recommendations?**

We probably get 1,500 e-mails a week. Every single e-mail is filed by location. And when the researchers start looking at a location, that's the first place they go. The problem is that a lot of times the local favorite is the local favorite because it's the local favorite. And folks will write you and say, "It's the best chili I've ever had." And when you call, it's Sysco chili and the fries are frozen and the burgers come in frozen and pre-pattied. And that's great because people should have the places they want to go and there's nothing wrong with frozen food.

Please don't think I'm being a snob. But the hit rate on viewer suggestions is not remarkably high. I would guess that 15 percent of the places come from e-mail. But I'm real reticent to say that because I don't want to in any way discourage anyone from writing in. We love to get viewer e-mail; we love to check them out. Some of our most amazing places have come from viewer e-mail. And once every season we run a viewer's choice episode in which we only do places that we found through viewer recommendation. We invite some of those viewers to be on the location and Guy will come in and will say: "Who told me to come here?" And all the hands will go up. So we want to be as connected to the viewers as possible.

### **Do you have restaurants themselves contacting you to be on the show?**

Well, here's the hard one. We have restaurants that these days are kind of doing a thing with their customers, [saying] everyone should e-mail us about them. And I'm glad to look at those places, no problem at all, but for the most part when you get an e-mail barrage and then you look at the place... I don't think any one of those places has yet made it past [our research]. For the most part when you're contacted on behalf of a restaurant it's probably not the best book. But again, I don't want to say no to anybody. If someone writes me and says, take a look at my place, we will be glad to.



Courtesy of Page Productions

**What would your average person be surprised to hear about when it comes to putting together a food show?**

I think the average person would be surprised at how hard you have to work to truly verify that the food is legit. Like I said, 80 places to book seven.

I think they would also be surprised about the length of time it takes to shoot a show. 'Cause we don't want them to see that. Years and years ago, there was a wonderful article in *American Cinematography* called "The Invisible Editing of *Kramer vs. Kramer*." It's a technical article that posited that one of the movies up for an Academy Award that year, and I may have my timeline wrong so I may be wrong about it, but it was *Flashdance*, which was like a music video. And you looked at *Flashdance* and you said, "Look at all the editing they're doing! It's just nifty." And then you looked at *Kramer vs. Kramer* and you didn't see the editing because it was storytelling.

I don't want anyone to see how hard we work. But in fact, you go there, you see reality, you catch it on a camera. If you're not careful, the camera distorts reality, so you then have to come back and put it back together to recreate the reality that's there and do it in a way that moves at a pretty good clip, that keeps people's interest. But I don't want anyone looking at the show and going: "Wow! Look at all those shots. They shot every single ingredient from all those angles! And then the shot of the people eating the food matched!" I just want them to enjoy the experience. But I think that people would be surprised by how much attention to detail is paid to make it right.

And then I think the third thing they would not know that I really want them to know is that it's true. Because so much reality television has been outed as a lie. It's really important that people understand that it's true. And probably the one other thing people don't get is that this show goes where Guy's intellect and emotion take him. For all the planning in the world, if Guy sees something being done that's "I haven't seen that before," that's where we're going to go.



Courtesy of Page Productions

### **Are you thinking of any other concepts for Food Network currently?**

We're developing another show for them at their request. In the process of casting it and if things go well, we're hoping to have it on the air in January. All I can tell you is that it's food-related and it's very cool.

I spent 14 years trying to get a show. Food Network gave me the opportunity. I've gone from season one cutting the show in my basement in my sweatpants to now, where we've got about 30 people working for us. "With us" is a better term because it's really important that we spend a lot of time building a family of the best, most talented people in this business in Minnesota who just rock it. I don't think anybody expected this show to be the kind of success it is. It's not bragging to say it's the highest-rated regular prime-time show they have, and what's remarkable about it is that the numbers keep going up. We last week achieved our highest ratings ever. The job that we have to focus on is that making sure that we keep the show the best it can be, that we keep it true to itself while we expand its circle a little.

When the show was first conceived, there was great concern among Food Network people that we would run out of places. And I said to them, "We're not going to run out of places, there's 700 diners in New Jersey alone." I said the soul of the show is not locked into its name. *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* is a terrific title, but the soul of the show is homemade food in the American, let's-go-out-and-have-a-reasonable-meal-for-a-good-price tradition done by people who really care, which does allow us to get into all kind of ethnic cooking.

We did a Bosnian joint today, we did a place in Trinidad recently, we've done a bunch of Haitian food of late. What we're doing is places Americans eat. That's what American cooking is. The key is that these are places run by people invested in their own place, invested in doing it right. We want to give you the show you expect with just enough variety and just enough continuing evolution that you don't get bored with it. I want it to always feel fresh.

### **Are people surprised to hear that the show is produced out of Minnesota?**

Stunned. People are shocked. People have a perception of television that it's done in LA or New York and it's not. If you look at other Food Network production companies larger than mine that have fed them for years, High Noon's in Denver.

Pie Town, I think, is in Pennsylvania. The cable world has now, in most respects, overtaken the traditional broadcast world as the place where you can get cool stuff. But in the early days, cable was a \$4 operation, it started in ancillary markets where it was cheaper. The quality didn't have to be that good. Now the coolest stuff on TV is clearly on cable. The most attention to quality is on cable. I mean, dramatically, you can't beat *Mad Men*. Take a look at the art direction on that show. It's phenomenal.

### **What does Guy think about Minnesota?**

He's almost never here. He's loved the food here. But also understand, Guy coming to Minnesota is all "home day on the farm" because most of the production crew lives here, the ones who travel with him. And he is extremely tight with them. My family and his family are very close. So coming to Minnesota means coming to my house, cooking dinner, which also means ordering me to get all sorts of stuff and then stand around and hand him things while he cooks.



Courtesy of Page Productions

### **What is your favorite type of place to go?**

I'm a New York Jew, so I guess you'll never get me away from a diner. I really like places that are run by the people who own them, who care deeply about what they're doing. And where if you're legitimately a regular, it's like coming home. There's a place in St. Paul on Minnehaha called the Dari-Ette Drive-in that was in our special. It's one of my favorite places on the face of the earth and I'm ashamed to say that I haven't been back there since we shot it. It's a woman who cares beyond description about making New York red sauce Italian food the way her father made it and she's making the sausage and meatballs from scratch. She is deep-frying both of them. She's doing a sandwich called the Italiano, which is deep-fried sausage, mozzarella, homemade sauce on the thickest Italian bread, not the crusty stuff. And she puts in the steamer and steams it. Then they bring it to your car. It's one of these places where you call on the buzzer. Now you can't beat that. That's real. That crosses all genres.

### **Besides the Dari-Ette, what are you favorite places to eat in town?**

I'm going to say something that probably your jaw's going to drop and say, "Oh my God, you have no taste." I actually recently had reason to have two business dinners at Redstone. And I thought they were very, very good, to be quite honest with you. In terms of the kinds of dives we've gone to, I loved Al's Breakfast. I loved the Town Talk, which is now under new management so I don't know, I'm assuming it's as good as it was. But I'm a very bad gauge of the food scene in this town because I'm at a period in my life where I mostly do my own cooking for the family. I like to cook and I'd rather go out and sit on my front porch and have a glass of wine and watch the corn grow across the fields because as an ex-urbanite, I didn't really have that before.

And Mickey's Diner, which I can't do for this show because I did it previously on a Roker show. But I know there are those who will tell you that it is generic. It's not generic at all. Mickey's is exactly what a diner should be. Making navy bean soup from scratch, the recipe is 60 years old. Making pancake batter from scratch. Mickey's, in my opinion, is one of the great restaurants in the country. I just love the place.

The Nook — we put the Nook on the air. That's an absolute world-class hamburger. And interestingly enough, people will say to you, "Well, why don't you do Matt's?" and I'm sure Matt's Jucy Lucy is great, but the reason we didn't do Matt's is the only thing they do is that burger and it's very hard to do a seven-minute television segment on a place that does one item. You can do one class of item. The Nook, we basically only did hamburgers and fries. But they have the Jucy Nookie and then they have the one that's double stacked with the cheese on top of it, so when it came to picking a burger joint to go to in town, I couldn't do Matt's. There wasn't enough menu there. It's no comment on the quality of their food. A million people I know and trust tell me that Matt's is amazing. There just wasn't enough variety of the menu, which is not a criticism of the restaurant. That's what they do.