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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

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Discovering

Emeril's

Florida

By Rachele Lucas

From a sweet and spicy "Cochinitos" Caramel and Chili Glazed Pork Belly, to cheesy southern Gritz-A-Ya-Ya, Emeril has been uncovering the Sunshine State's delicious food scene in his popular new show, *Emeril's Florida*, on the Cooking Channel.

Each 30-minute episode is peppered with mouthwatering food shots while showcasing Florida's great festivals, abundant agriculture, top chefs, and award-winning restaurants. He traveled to over 30 locations from Pensacola to Miami, touring hydroponic farms, fishing in the Gulf, visiting one of the largest cattle ranches in the country, and even giving us a little insight into the cosmic cuisine he helped create for the space program.

Quite a few of the episodes finish with Emeril working with one of Florida's chefs, cooking up a delicious dinner by the ocean with the sunset behind them, casting brilliant orange and pink colors across the sky. It leaves you hungry not just for food, but for a night out relaxing at the beach as well.

I had a chance to chat with Pat Roberts, the Co-Executive Producer of *Emeril's Florida*, and a good friend of Emeril.



Emeril with
Chris Pontre at
Cafe Ponte

Emeril was captured by the relaxed, carefree style that Florida is known for.



Loews Don
Cesar Hotel in
St. Pete Beach



How did you and Emeril meet? What was the inspiration for the show?

I've been fishing buddies with Emeril for the past 6 years. We actually met out on the dock in Sandestin since our boats were only two slips from each other. My son went fishing with him one day and soon after our families just became good friends. Now we fish every summer and winter and work together to support his charity, The Emeril Lagasse Foundation.

As you can imagine, wine, food, and ideas flow freely when hanging out with Emeril. I guess that's where the inspiration came to showcase the food and culinary experiences we have here in Florida.

What is it about this state that made Emeril decide to make Florida his home?

Emeril's wife is from Mississippi and her family used to always vacation down on the beaches of South Walton, so she's the one that introduced him to the area. After visiting, Emeril was captured by the relaxed, carefree style that Florida is known for. He loved that the kids could go to school and ride bikes and play at the beach and just be happy, normal kids. He's also thrilled to hop on his boat and go fishing any chance he gets; it's his retreat and escape from work.

What did Emeril learn about Florida foods?

I think Emeril was really amazed at the variety available and the quality of the chefs we have here in Florida. From casual fare to exceptional fine dining, we tried it all. We went to four distinguished historic resorts throughout the state: the **Don Cesar** in **St. Pete Beach**, the **Biltmore Hotel** in **Coral Gables**, the **Breakers** in **West Palm Beach**, and the **Grand Floridian** in **Orlando**. All had really impressive world-class restaurants.

There were also some pretty unusual places that surprised him. In



Cassis American
Brasserie,
St. Petersburg

Emeril was really amazed at the variety available and the quality of the chefs we have here in Florida.

Santa Rosa Beach there's a place called **Stinky's**, which thankfully, doesn't live up to its name. The seafood there is fresh from the coast and prepared with some classic southern sides. It's really popular among the locals. Also, in the Keys, we had the biggest conch fritters I've ever seen at **Alabama Jack's**. It's a recipe that's been in the chef's family for 50 years.

Did Emeril have any non-food activities that stood out as his favorite?

Emeril loves to fish, so any chance we had to get out on the boat for a fresh catch was fun. Besides fishing, we went to a place in Orlando called **Ice Bar**, which as its name suggests, is entirely made of ice. You have to wear a special coat and everything. It was wild.

Also, he travels to Clearwater frequently for his work on HSN, but had never had the opportunity until now to explore the beach and spend some time relaxing at the **Sandpearl Resort**. It was nice to have the opportunity to experience a different side of places we'd already visited.

Was there any place that Emeril visited that was new to him? If so, what were his first impressions?

I think the history impressed him, especially in **Pensacola**. We learned that **Jackson's Steak House** is in a building from the 1860s and was the location where Florida was first recognized as

Bouillabaisse
Dish at Cassis
American
Brasserie.



CASSIS OUTSIDE SHOT: MARK WENDEL

Tucked away in a destination where sun, sea, and the best in local food and drink are just a short drive away. And if feasting on the best in local food and drink is your thing, then this is the place to adventure to.



"People think we're all beaches and attractions, but when it comes to cuisine we can hold our own with any major city."

The Renaissance
Vinoy Hotel in
St. Petersburg



Babcock
Wilderness
Adventures

a state. Andrew Jackson accepted the transfer of Florida from Spain to the U.S. in the plaza in front of the building where the restaurant now resides. And, of course, we know he later went on to become President of the United States. We found that fascinating.

There's also an Irish Pub, **McGuire's**, with a million dollars stapled to the ceiling! It's quite a sight to see that many one-dollar bills overhead and the place is pretty fun. It's located in Pensacola's historic 1927 firehouse and has a real traditional pub feel.

Is there any Florida city or destination that he didn't make it to during the show that he'd like to visit?

To do all of the suggestions we received would take years. During this season, we highlighted some of the bigger cities, but even within places like **Miami** and **Tampa**, there are so many great restaurants it's hard to capture them all.



Tampa

At a cattle auction, Emeril got so excited that he hollered his catchphrase, BAM, and startled the auctioneer.



I think we'd like to go back to some of the specific farms and more rural areas. We talked about citrus during the show, but we want to go and be on location visiting an orange grove. It would also be nice to pace ourselves and just spend more time in each city.

Any humorous stories to share that were not on camera?

As I said before, Emeril loves to fish, and so one day out on the water we had gone just a little too far out and it took us a little too long to get back to shore. We were supposed to make it back to shoot the sunset for dinner and nearly missed it. Thankfully there were lights brought in so we could get the segment done.

Also, seeing Emeril at the cattle auction was hilarious. We were at Adams Ranch, one of the oldest ranches in Florida. You know how those auctioneers talk a mile a minute, well Emeril got so excited that he hollered his catchphrase, BAM, and startled the auctioneer.

Tell us about Emeril's experience at Kennedy Space Center.

Not many people know this, but a

while back Emeril was asked to develop meals for the space program to add some flavor to their menu. So, the episode where we visited the **Kennedy Space Center** was definitely one of his favorites. He got to ride in a flight simulator with former NASA Astronaut, Col. Rick Searfoss.

[I did some research and discovered Emeril's menu for the International Space Station included his signature Mardi Gras jambalaya, mashed potatoes with bacon, green beans with garlic, rice pudding and mixed fruit. They were delivered to the station in July 2006 by the space shuttle Discovery.]

I've read that in addition to being a chef, Emeril is also a drummer. Any night spots he'd recommend for catching some good live music?

[Laughs] He is a good drummer! Growing up, his parents thought he'd pursue music instead of becoming a chef, but he ended up turning down a scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music. Food is really what he's passionate about. He still does love percussion and is buds

with Kenny Chesney, Sammy Hagar, and Jonathan Cain [of Journey].

Overall, where do you think Florida cuisine is headed?

Emeril would tell you that we have 5 major markets for great restaurants and food and just as many top sommeliers as New York. Yet, we're still kind of undiscovered. People think we're all beaches and attractions, but when it comes to cuisine we can hold our own with any major city. Emeril is having a great time sharing that.

What's next for Emeril?

We start shooting our next season of *Emeril's Florida* at the end of summer.

The new episodes will start airing again in January 2014. Until then, people can still see current episodes re-air on the Cooking Channel. All the recipes from the show can be found at CookingChannelTV.com.

Stay tuned for next season!

