



Talking with My Mouth Full: My Life as a Professional Eater

Gail Simmons

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When *Top Chef* judge Gail Simmons first graduated from college, she felt hopelessly lost. All her friends were going to graduate school, business school, law school . . . but what was she going to do? Fortunately, a family friend gave her some invaluable advice-make a list of what you love to do, and let that be your guide. Gail wrote down four words: Eat. Write. Travel. Cook. Little did she know, those four words would become the basis for a career as a professional eater, cook, food critic, magazine editor, and television star. Today, she's the host of *Top Chef: Just Desserts*, permanent judge on *Top Chef*, and Special Projects Director at *Food & Wine* magazine. She travels all over the world, eats extraordinary food, and meets fascinating people. She's living the dream that so many of us who love to cook and eat can only imagine. But how did she get there? *Talking with My Mouth Full* follows her unusual and inspiring path to success, step-by-step and bite-by-bite. It takes the reader from her early years, growing up in a household where her mother ran a small cooking school, her father made his own wine, and family vacation destinations included Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East; through her adventures at culinary school in New York City and training as an apprentice in two of New York's most acclaimed kitchens; and on to her time spent assisting Vogue's legendary food critic Jeffrey Steingarten, working for renowned chef Daniel Boulud, and ultimately landing her current jobs at *Food & Wine* and on *Top Chef*. The book is a tribute to the incredible meals and mentors she's had along the way, examining the somewhat unconventional but always satisfying journey she has taken in order to create a career that didn't even exist when she first started working toward it. With memorable stories about the greatest (and worst) dishes she's eaten, childhood and behind-the-scenes photos, and recipes from Gail's family and her own kitchen, *Talking with My Mouth Full* is a true treat.

Talking with My Mouth Full: My Life as a Professional Eater Details

Date : Published February 21st 2012 by Hachette Books (first published 2012)

ISBN : 9781401324506

Author : Gail Simmons

Format : Hardcover 270 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Food and Drink, Food, Autobiography, Memoir, Cooking, Biography

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Gwendolyn says

I read a lot of food-based memoirs, and this one was one of the most interesting I've come across. Gail Simmons has traveled along a very unusual career path, including culinary school, hands-on kitchen work, magazine work, event coordinating, and, of course, TV work in connection with Top Chef and Top Chef: Just Desserts. I really enjoyed her stories about her family life as a young girl and particularly her mother's work in the kitchen. As a rabid Top Chef fan, I loved the chapters about the show, including the grueling recording schedule and the different personalities of the other judges/hosts (especially Padma and Tom). But, most of all, I loved the personal touches Gail put into this memoir, including her Visa troubles as a Canadian trying to work in the US, issues about her weight (all of her TV viewers are much more hung up on it than she is), and juggling a work-family balance. Gail's conversational style drew me in from the beginning and kept me reading all the way to the end. After reading Talking with my Mouth Full, I have even more respect and admiration for Gail than I did before, and I can't wait to see her on the next season of Top Chef.

M Christopher says

Gail Simmons has certainly led an interesting, even a charmed life. In fact, she's a real charmer as well. She comes off as a truly likable person in her memoir, which isn't surprising given her on-screen persona. What is surprising is that there is very little of the naughty wit which she occasionally airs on TV evident in this book. One is left thinking, what a nice little sister, what a nice neighbor, what a nice mom of my kid's friend, but not much of that twinkle in her eye that one gets on "Top Chef." One is tempted to repeat John Riggins' infamous drunken advice to Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor: "Loosen up, Gail, baby. You're too tight."

Still, it's a fun read.

Holly Booms Walsh says

A simple, straightforward, humble memoir by Gail Simmons of Top Chef fame. She is earnest and rather adorable - and she tells her stories even when they make her look neurotic or odd. Her love of food and the geniuses that make amazing food shines clearly through the pages. I love the recipes at the end that refer back to her stories of growing up and getting married.

Eric says

The only reason I am guessing most people picked up this book -- myself included -- is because they wanted to hear about Top Chef from an insider.

Well, spoiler alert, only two chapters of this book deal with Top Chef -- *Chapter Eleven: At the Judges' Table* and *Chapter Fourteen: Sugared Up on Just Desserts* -- and one of those is about the uninspired pastry

spin-off. Even then, neither are particularly interesting, as she spends most of the former defending their judging decisions (we were fair and non-biased, I swear!), and the latter on how much harder it is being the host of the show and not a judge. Yawn.

Instead, she spends a large chunk of the book detailing her life growing up, which was as uninteresting as it was elitist. But don't take my word for it, judge for yourself. Here are some ~~humblebrags~~ snippets from her life growing up:

It was an upper-middle-class community, with a large Jewish population... our neighborhood was more or less spotless, and the schools were good.

It was the year of my bat mitzvah, so my father and I went to visit [my grandparents] in **South Africa** as part of the milestone birthday present.

I was thirteen, on Christmas vacation in **Costa Rica**. This was well over twenty years ago, when Costa Rica was not yet an eco-destination.

Upon graduating from high school three years earlier, my then-boyfriend and I decided to spend the summer in **Israel**.

I lived in Montreal for four years, attending McGill University, an Anglophone college, often called "the Harvard of Canada."

When I was nineteen, I spent the summer in **Australia** with my roommate, Cami.

Taking a semester abroad wasn't a common thing to do in Canada when I was in college, but I was desperate to travel and decided to go to **Spain** with two of my girlfriends, Annaliese and Rachel.

From there, we spent several weeks backpacking through Europe together, from northern Spain into southern **France**, through the top of **Italy** down to **Rome**, then up into **Switzerland**, to **Germany** for a music festival in **Nuremberg**, and on to the **Czech Republic**, where I spent the morning of my twenty-first birthday wandering alone through a castle in **Prague**. From there, we went up to **Holland** and into **Belgium**, where in **Bruges** I visited the school my mother had attended so many years before, and to **Paris** for several days. I ended my trip in **London**, staying with family friends. I went to the Royal Ballet Theatre and a performance at the newly opened Globe Theatre.

And that was all before she finished college.

From there, she details her equally enchanted work history, where she falls into choice positions working at Le Cirque, for food critic Jeffrey Steingarten, and for chef Daniel Boulud. This is not someone who rose up the ranks from the position of dishwasher. A myriad of people in her life have handed her once-in-a-lifetime opportunities without so much as her prompting them with any interest. Oh, and she has never worked for or with someone that wasn't just *amazing*. Or, at least, that is how she tells it. Just how charmed can one person's life be?

I mean, she has only actually been upset five times in her entire life: 1) When her high school boyfriend broke up with her, 2) When her college boyfriend did the same, 3) When she got an overcooked omelette at a diner, 4) When she was turned away from a restaurant that was closing for the night, and 5) When her adopted brother had a mental break-down.

Instead of being subtitled "My Life as a Professional Eater," a topic this book doesn't delve into enough, it should be titled "Serendipity and Wealth," which seems to be the two defining traits that allow her to continue floating on her happy little cloud, high above the rest of us.

So why two stars? The book was easy reading -- I did manage to finish it, after all -- and Simmons does have some talent as a writer. So, there's that. There are also some recipes in the back of the book which may have some promise.

Lauren orso says

The moral is, that if you come from (enough!) money which furnishes you with (enough!) luck, you can do anything. What separates Gail Simmons from Mitt Romney, then, is she is charming in a quietly Canadian way (but PLEASE stop saying boobs, or cut back to every other page). But still, you'll notice every time she does not get something she wants, it 1. turns into a Major Life Event, and 2. she cries about it. Diners have weird omelettes, and this is ingrained in the collective knowledge of our society. Rich People, a note to you: don't cry about your bad omelettes. That is something a poor person would do, and you should let them at least have that much.

Jennifer Joelle says

I suspect that most people who are reading this book want to be Gail Simmons. Her demographic I would think would be women in their late 20s to early 40s or gay men. Regardless of who you are, I understand your thought process. What a sweet life.

Gail is charming, and adorably sexy in a non model, finally a real woman sort of way. She isn't conventional. She chased her dreams and acknowledges that she is lucky. For a foodie, she is someone who gets to live any other foodie's dream, and she has enviable connections. I didn't find her descriptions to be overly enthusiastic and one can deduce that she not only had to actually work to get the jobs she wanted, but that they were in fact paired with a little of the aforementioned luck. She's still youthful in adulthood so her memoir obviously doesn't span decade upon decade, but it is lavish with a world that seems easy, yet real and magical at the same time.

Gail is obviously good at what she does; eating, hosting and writing. And like most of us, she is better at some things than others. She isn't a writer's writer, but she is an interesting and a compelling storyteller. After all, the book is about her. There is the occasional awkward sentence or paragraph, but overall I read the book because I was interested in her life, the path she took and where it will lead.

And it was a wonderful glimpse at a very real person. Someone you would immediately be comfortable having a glass of wine with. If you love TC or wished for a life in food, this book is absolutely enjoyable.

MissAnnThrope says

This sounded like it would be an inspiring read for any foodie on how to make their dream come true doing

their favorite thing in the whole world: eating. *Talking with My Mouth Full: My Life as a Professional Eater* presents Gail Simmons' journey to her coveted career as a professional eater. Unfortunately, it is presented in such a dull, mundane way that it does little to inspire. The most interesting part is her time spent in her exhausting externship, which is a very small part in the entire book.

Gail Simmons comes across as very privileged. It seems her envious job is simply due to being at the right place at the right time. There were moments in the book where I rolled my eyes at her vanity.

"My mother was a bombshell when she was younger, with jet-black hair, porcelain skin, and serious cleavage (I may have inherited that last trait from her)."

Well, now. Toot! Toot!

Her enjoyment for killing an animal because they're "*such animals*" bothered me a bit.

For being a food writer, Simmons' writing is seriously lacking. She didn't get me excited about the food, and I felt bored reading about a very interesting topic. I had to fight the urge not to skip chunks of this book because it felt so tedious.

I do like the chapter at the end that contains her life story according to collected recipes. Brilliant idea.

If you're looking to be inspired or lose yourself in a culinary adventure, there are far better books out there.

Niya says

I want to like Gail. She's a Toronto girl, who works in an industry that I've worked in. In some ways, she is living my dream - she lives in New York, spends her days with some of North America's Top Chefs (pun intended), assisted Jefferey Steingarten and travels everywhere to put delicious things in her mouth. I should want her life - but the way she describes it makes her seem more than a little clueless. This book is part "Oh, I'm so lucky that my family is so well connected," and part "I got lucky with my timing." There are no puritan values, or any evidence of strategic thinking. Gail's life, over this series of essays, seems to coast on a pretty even keel - save for the two pivotal moments where she finds herself living in her parent's basement. It's not necessarily a bad story - but she skims, or barely explores key turning points, and edits out what could be critical pieces that would help her readers relate. The only real reason to read it is for Jacques Torre's souffle recipe in the back.

Kyle says

My wife and I began watching Top Chef during its first season and have watched every episode of every iteration since. It's our thing. Every Wednesday night we make a batch of popcorn and plop down in front to watch some amazing chefs make some delicious looking food. And though I love Head Judge Tom Colicchio and I think host Padma Lakshmi does a wonderful job, Gail Simmons is really the heart of the show. I just love her comments and her love of food. Recently I got the chance to sit in on a cooking session with Gail at the Austin Food and Wine festival and get this book signed and she could not have been more gracious or nice to her many fans.

So I might be what you would call the perfect audience for this book. I really enjoyed learning about Gail's past and how she ended up on the judge panel of Top Chef. I had no idea she had traveled so much nor did I

know she also thinks that everything is better with a fried egg on top (so true). I can't wait to try Biltong (air dried salted meat) and some of the recipes she had at the back of the book. Also, I can't wait for Season 10 of Top Chef to start!

Ann says

I spent half of this book trying to figure out how a food writer could be so completely inept at writing about food (and writing, period), until I got to the chapters about the author's time at Food & Wine Magazine and realized that she's actually an event planner with chef's training, not a food writer. Don't they describe her on Top Chef as a food writer? In any case, the book isn't very good. Three stars is a pretty generous rating, but the book is redeemed by the fact that Gail Simmons has had a lot of really interesting jobs, and her knowledge of the culinary world made this worth reading. I enjoyed the parts about Top Chef, but to be honest, I can never remember anything about it after the season is over, so all her anecdotes seemed completely foreign to me, even though I know I've watched the episodes she talks about. I was also kind of bothered by the fact that, although she's held these amazing positions, she never acknowledges just how INSANELY fortunate she is in everything. Seriously, whose first job out of culinary school is on the line at Le Cirque? And THEN goes to work as Jeffrey Steingarten's assistant? AND THEN works at Daniel????? These things all blew my mind, but she never gives any indication that they blew her mind as well. At one point, her dream job is just handed to her by the incumbent. WHA???????

I loved learning about this world, but in the end, I'm not interested enough in Gail Simmons herself to care about her stories about family and marriage. It's too bad that her extraordinary food experiences also fall flat through her mediocre writing.

Happyreader says

Really should be called "How I got my fabulous job." Nothing wrong with that but feel free to skip the somewhat tedious childhood portion. If you're a fellow McGill grad, like myself, start in Montreal, although it's surprisingly lean on Montreal food. Otherwise, start with the move to NYC, which begins the road to her fabulous job. Smartest move she ever made was going to culinary school (sorry McGill). Peter Kump had the best placement office EVER. They got her into the best restaurants for her externship and the best post-grad job, working as Jeffrey Steingarten's assistant. After that, she worked the great connections those jobs, especially with Jeffrey, got her. Fun insider snapshots of the business side of fine dining, food magazines, and Top Chef. If you're not a Top Chef fan, the last third of the book will be so tiresome for you. And don't hope for any dirt if you are a fan. Gail loves everybody. Sorry if that's a spoiler but she is Canadian after all.

Judy says

Although I enjoyed reading it, this book was spotty. The first part describes a lot of Gail Simmons' (best known as a judge on Top Chef) early life, which I found interesting but not for as long as it went on in the book. Still, it was good to see that she has solid credentials, having graduated from culinary school and worked in restaurants and the restaurant business before going on to write for Food and Wine and organize major food events. My favorite parts were the behind-the-scenes look at Top Chef and Top Chef: Just Desserts. I was surprised that the writing wasn't better, since she is a food writer. Still, I found it worth the read.

Maria says

Meh. Simmons' life story is interesting enough, but she is clearly not a food writer (which I thought she was for some reason...) I honestly expected to be ravenous as she described her different experiences with food-- which, seriously, if you subtitle your book as 'Life as a Professional Eater', is not asking that much. The reality was that she just listed off meals without much fanfare. I personally enjoyed her lists of food in Spain, but only because I brought my own experiences to the table. Not to mention the strange non-sequiturs about her mentally ill brother (Objection, Your Honor. Relevance?) All in all, I was pretty disappointed by a book I had been really looking forward to reading.

That being said, I enjoyed the backstage glimpse at the Top Chef group of series. I appreciated her descriptions of kitchens that were not Bourdain-esque (ie, didn't sound like the galley of a pirate ship). I'll give it three stars (but would prefer a 2.5).

Kathleen says

Not terribly well-written but entertaining enough if you're a TC fan/fan of food writing.

What ticked me off about the book most was the massive disconnect between the book's jacket blurbs and its content. The jacket insisted this was the story of how "hard work always wins out."

Bullshit.

I'm not saying working for Jeffrey Steingarten wasn't "trying," but in NO way, shape, or form did I get the impression from Simmons that hard work led to her success. In fact, time and again her story suggested the serendipity of being in the right place at the right time. Asking a career counselor to hook her up with a dream job, virtual strangers approaching her and asking "do you want my plum job?," and riding the crest of a new field (reality TV) do not equal hard work. They equal luck. Incredible luck.

Simmons may speak disparagingly of Bourdain's macho food writing (and her gender criticisms of the industry and of society in general seem fair) but at least with B I get the impression that he WORKED for 28 years in food, and that his hard work paid off eventually. (And there is NO contest re: who is the better writer.) With Simmons her life seems like one big lesson in how wealth and opportunity (her family is clearly well-off and her childhood and adulthood enormously privileged due to her parents) beget more wealth and opportunity.

Wendy says

I struggled with the beginning of this book but by the end I was on board. I found a lot of the more traditional memoir aspects a lot less interesting than the rest, especially in the first few chapters. I didn't end up caring about her family, her early life, or her schooling very much at all. I'm usually fairly sentimental about that kind of thing so I haven't quite been able to pinpoint why it felt flat to me. I've decided that those parts seem to rely a lot more on telling over showing. I imagine it is a tough choice when you are writing about real people. Maintaining that kind of distance makes sense but it doesn't make for particularly

compelling reading, especially since it distanced me from Simmons herself. I kept thinking that for someone who seems to be pretty cool on television, she seemed pretty limp on the page. And then she got on with it. And I finally got it.

Simmons is at her best when she is writing about food and the food world. The descriptions of her time working in the kitchen, as an assistant for Jeffrey Steingarten, working for Daniel Boulud, on Top Chef and Top Chef: Just Desserts, her meals and menus, were all quite engaging. The details about her work, the food, the production, the chefs, and her opinions, were often insightful, fun, and sounded more like the person I had imagined her to be. Or maybe it was that those sections tended to force the writing into a place that wasn't so clearly centered on her.

Whatever the reason, by the time she returns to family details, they are easier to handle. Many of the stories about her husband were sweet. I don't know if the writing got more lively or if the goodwill she had built up with me smoothed things over, or what, but It worked a lot better.

In the end, I would recommend the book. I'll enjoy watching the shows a bit more now and I consider that a bonus.
