

MEET THE FOODIES

WHO WILL
MAKE YOU

Laugh
AND

WARM YOUR
Heart

~ ~ ~

Classmates Jeff Mauro '00
and Shauna Sever '00 use their
Midwestern charm to take the
culinary world by storm.

FOOD NETWORK
BY WENDY VINGLINSKY
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Jeff Mauro '00 was mid-answer during our phone interview when his son, Lorenzo, interrupted.

“Hey, bud, what’s up? ... A snack? You just ate like an hour ago!”

The elder Mauro apologized before joking because of the pandemic, “when you’re home with the family, they’re always here!” Then he negotiated like a pro by suggesting a piece of fruit. Lorenzo countered with a bowl of chips. They both agreed on yogurt.

“See? Look at that,” Mauro said, proud he convinced his kid to eat some protein. “You just saw Fathering 101!”

Previously known to television audiences as the “Sandwich King,” the current co-host of Food Network’s “The Kitchen” is as personable, funny and sarcastic off-screen as he is when the cameras are rolling. One of four siblings, Mauro was the jokester at the raucous family dinner table. As the school class clown, he learned how to capitalize on his affable nature.

“The key was to not be disruptive and get in trouble, and I always managed to find that sweet spot where I could somewhat charm the teachers but also make the kids laugh without being destructive.”

Although his family considered him a prime candidate for sports, the Chicago native gravitated toward the performing arts from the moment he touched the stage for his third-grade production of “Let George Do It!” His parents enrolled him in acting classes, which led to lessons at The Second City, the world-famous improv theatre troupe. By the end of high school, Mauro was sure he had what it took to make it.

“I proposed it to my parents when I was a senior, before I started applying to colleges,” he said. “I was like, ‘You

know, I get it. I know you want me to go to a school. How about I just live in the city for a year, start young, immerse myself in this world of improv and comedy, and then if that doesn’t work out? Boom, go to college.’ But they were like, ‘Hell no, you’re going to college.’”

So, Mauro followed his older brother **Frank '97** and enrolled at Bradley in the fall of 1996, followed later by younger sister **Emily '04**.

BOOKWORM TURNED WRITER TURNED PERFORMER

While young Mauro developed his comedic chops, **Shauna Sever '00** grew up as a bookworm in the Windy City’s northwest suburbs.

“I definitely was not an athletic child,” she confessed. “If there was anything I was going to be in an advanced class doing, it was going to be reading, writing or English-related.”



That's not surprising for someone who already has four published cookbooks to her name, including "Midwest Made: Big, Bold Baking from the Heartland," an homage to her roots. The New York Times named it to their Best Baking Cookbooks of 2019 list.

Sever's love of the written word developed early. She started her ardent reading habit around age 2 and later found she loved writing stories. This led Sever and her younger sister to create alternate worlds and characters, which they brought to life by putting on little plays.

Although she considers herself a little bit introverted, Sever studied theater and made a quick progression. While in high school, she signed with talent agents in Chicago and Los Angeles, auditioning for television networks. Sever's teenage mind raced at the possibility of success in such a daunting business.

"My parents were very practical people. While they were very proud of my acting talents and my experience, they very much wanted me to go to college and get a more practical degree."

Neither of Sever's parents had pursued higher education. They encouraged their daughter's abilities, but like any parents, they wanted her to have the opportunities they hadn't.

"In my way of trying to rebel, I was auditioning for conservatories and trying to prove that I could get into these schools," said Sever. "And I did actually get into some really great conservatory programs. But in the end, that wasn't how it was going to be if I wanted help paying for college."

BIRTH OF THE SANDWICH KING

After graduation, Mauro opened a restaurant, Prime Time Deli & Catering, with his cousin. Food was always prominent in his Italian American family — he calls his mother "my greatest culinary influence and a tremendous cook" — but his professional love of cooking began at age 15 while working at a local butcher shop. He eventually made his first sandwiches and served customers lunch; he was hooked.

"For me, I was always just being a comedian," he said. "The most gratifying thing is laughter. And to me, when someone's chewing and smiling after you feed them or make them something, it's on par with laughter; it's the same gratification."

Mauro made sandwiches, soups and salads at Prime Time during the day, then performed in the immersive

dinner show "Tony n' Tina's Wedding" at night. It was exhausting, but it forced him to hone his improv skills, learn how to work a room and cook while talking. He moved to Los Angeles to become a comedian but ended up at the famous Le Cordon Bleu culinary school, graduating at the top of his class.

"I kind of became an adult and I said, 'Listen. If I don't make it as a comedian or whatever, I always have food, and if I make it in entertainment, I always have food to add to that, to differentiate myself,'" he said. "I always had this trajectory of trying to combine these two loves of food and entertainment, and I always knew that Food Network would be the pinnacle of that cuz they own it."

He auditioned for "Food Network Star" — the long-running competition/reality series where the winner got their own show — and failed. Mauro and his family moved home to Chicago, where he resumed cooking full time and performing on the weekends. He auditioned for "Food Network Star" twice more. Before his fourth attempt his wife, **Sarah Jones Mauro '00**, said to him, "If you audition for it this year, you're going to make it on the show and our life is going to change forever."

After winning season 7, Mauro's program "Sandwich King" debuted in 2011 and ran for five seasons.

MIDWEST FOOD ROOTS

Meanwhile, with a journalism degree in hand, Sever and her husband, **Scott Webb '99**, moved to Los Angeles in 2003 to chase her Hollywood dreams. She found success as an entertainment news host and reporter but didn't love the shine and glitz of the show biz lifestyle.

To document her ongoing baking hobby and reignite her writing talent, Sever started the blog "Piece of Cake," now shaunasever.com. She next gave birth to daughter Caroline, son Andrew and three cookbooks: "Marshmallow Madness," "Pure Vanilla" and "Real Sweet." Eventually, she returned to the airwaves, feeling more at ease talking about food than interviewing celebrities.

The family moved back to Chicago in 2015 for Webb to serve as CEO and president of the business and technology consulting company Avionos. Coming home served as the inspiration for "Midwest Made."

"I realized that a lot of the food that I love is specifically from the Midwest," she said. "I took it for granted as being available everywhere, and it is not. So much of it has great stories to go along with it, and part of the motivation for writing the book was wanting to give

(my kids) something, so they never felt that they had to leave this place to appreciate it the way that I had to.”

The baker’s happiest memories include the smells of potent Greek olive oils, mostaccioli with red gravy, corned beef, schnitzel and various sweets. Her Greek-Sicilian grandfather was a tremendous cook, while her German-Swedish-Irish grandmother’s love of baking became Sever’s inspiration. So were the goodies her grandmother would bring from the local shops.

“A lot of those bakery items were things that influenced what I wanted this book to be; you see those in different chapters, especially the first chapter, the sweet doughs. The yeasted items are things that you’ll find in Chicago-area bakeries and Midwestern bakeries. That influence comes from (my grandmother). There was always some kind of coffee cake in a white paper box on the kitchen counter. She was that kind of person.”

With renewed purpose, Sever re-examined her roots by delving into tattered, old recipes, newspaper clippings, and vintage and church community cookbooks. She toured the Midwest, using her journalism background to interview families and bakers, and learned about the history and traditions of the immigrant-influenced treats that make up the region’s food culture.

Three years and 300 pages later, “Midwest Made” was published in 2019. Called a “love letter to the Heartland” it contains personal tales, over 100 reimagined recipes and images of delectable sweets.

STAYING ENGAGED, LAYING LOW

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, Mauro has kept himself busy both on and off screen. When “The Kitchen” pivoted to at-home production last April, his wife and son took the place of a 100-person crew.

“I think it adds a whole level of authenticity that the studio doesn’t give you,” said Mauro. “I can give Bob Jacobs (former head of Bradley’s radio/television department) a shout out for teaching me what it takes, the behind-the-scenes efforts necessary to make quality television. It really did come in handy! I finally used that (radio/television) degree.”

The chef launched MauroProvisions.com, offering custom butcher boxes of meats and sausages while he and his sister, Emily, started the podcast, “Come on Over,” sharing food tips, tricks and recipes, fun family stories, music and more.

In January, Mauro’s new cooking reality competition show, “Kitchen Crash,” premiered on Food Network. His first cookbook, “Come on Over: 111 Fantastic

Recipes for the Busiest House on the Block,” will release in April. He joked he was playing catch up to his former classmate.

“You know, it’s taken me nine years to write one cookbook, and (Shauna) shoots ’em out like a book a year!”

While Mauro has forged ahead, Sever has taken the opposite approach. The pandemic canceled or postponed many book events and other scheduled appearances, prompting her to take freelance writing projects and virtual author events when possible. Mainly, she shifted her goal from developing new ventures to celebrating “Midwest Made” by sharing it with more audiences.

“For a really long time, I was super focused on the creating part, and feeling like if I wasn’t actively creating, then somehow the work was less valuable,” said Sever. “The thing that I have realized through these months of having everything slow down is that taking the thing that you create, and very carefully and lovingly getting it out into the world and to the people who need and want it, is as important as the creating itself.”


She also used her position and resources within the publishing community to serve others by offering free consultation sessions to women of color wanting to write a food-related book.

“Having the journalism background has come in handy for writing cookbooks in a way that I wouldn’t have known when I started this, but it’s all stuff that I still use. I’m starting to move into a different stage where it’s less about me and the validation of what I’m doing, and more about how can it help somebody else?”

“What have I already learned that I can offer to someone? That, I think, is the thing that will move things forward and make the world a better place, not just throwing another cake recipe out there.”

The college friends — who once spent a summer studying in Europe with fellow Bradley students — have gone from teens with lofty dreams to formidable names in the culinary world. From Chicago to Peoria to L.A. and back, their stories remain so parallel they currently live one town apart and occasionally run into each other at the local Trader Joe’s.

Above all, despite their successes, Mauro and Sever are still down-to-earth, kind and humble Midwesterners. Sever captured this essence in her latest cookbook.

“We like to lie low, and then out of nowhere, blow minds and take names with our hidden stories and talents. And then sort of play off the compliments. Dull shine at its very best.” 



KEN GOODMAN



PAUL STRABBING



JEFF'S ORIGINAL CHICAGO CHEESESTEAKS

By Jeff Mauro

- One 1-lb. package of Mauro Provision's shaved ribeye (available at Mauro Provisions.com)
- 1 tablespoon olive oil, plus more for brushing the rolls
- 2 teaspoons garlic salt
- Cheese sauce (2 slices of sharp provolone / 2 slices of white American cheese)
- Caramelized onions
- 6 fresh sub rolls, hinged or sliced three quarters of the way through
- Hot giardiniera

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Brush the sub rolls with oil all over the outside and inside, set them on a sheet pan and bake for about 5 minutes, until lightly toasted. Slice the rolls horizontally.

Heat a large nonstick skillet over high heat. Add the oil and a nice even layer of the meat. Season with the garlic salt. Now, don't move the meat. Let it get a nice crispy crust, 3 to 4 minutes. Using tongs, flip the mound of meat to give the top of the pile some heat exposure. Top with 2 slices of provolone and 2 slices of American cheese. Mix it around a bit until the cheese melts and mingles with the crispy meaty bits and everything marries into one homogenous, nebulous mass. Take off the heat immediately to preserve all that juiciness!

Divide the caramelized onions, then the meat, among the rolls, stuffing each roll to the brim. Top the meat with hot giardiniera. Serve with some BBQ chips, a cheesesteak bib and about 6 cold light beers. Makes 6 sandwiches.

THE ONLY BANANA BREAD YOU'LL EVER NEED

By Shauna Sever

- Nonstick cooking spray for pan
- 1 3/4 cups mashed, very ripe bananas*
- 3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons firmly packed dark brown sugar

- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 1/3 cup well-shaken buttermilk, at room temperature
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon dark rum (optional)
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 2 cups plus 2 tablespoons unbleached all-purpose flour, spooned and leveled
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 3 tablespoons granulated sugar for sprinkling

Position a rack to the lower third of the oven and preheat it to 325°F. Spray a 9 x 5-inch loaf pan with nonstick cooking spray and line it with parchment paper with a couple of inches of overhang on two opposite sides.

In a large bowl, stir together the mashed bananas, brown sugar, oil, buttermilk, eggs, rum (if using) and vanilla.

In a medium bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt.

Pour the dry ingredients into the wet and fold until just blended. Pour the batter into the prepared pan.

Place the granulated sugar in a small bowl. Dampen your fingertips with water and work them into the sugar until it just begins to look like snow — if you pinch some, it should just barely hold together. Sprinkle the dampened sugar over the batter, aiming to get it clumped up together in spots.

Bake until a toothpick inserted into the center of the cake comes out clean, 60 to 70 minutes. Let cool for 20 minutes in the pan, then use the parchment paper to help lift the loaf out of the pan and cool completely on a wire rack. Store any leftovers in an airtight container for up to 5 days. Serves 8 to 10.

**If you like to freeze bananas for bread-making purposes, just make sure you thaw them to room temperature, and then drain them for several minutes in a sieve to avoid adding too much liquid to the batter.*