

Food Network Highlights Chef Obesity Problem

NEW YORK (AP) — Paula Deen's diabetes revelation pretty much sums it up: Kitchen pros at all levels struggle with obesity and its dangerous aftertaste in the high-pressure, high-calorie world of food.

The queen of Southern comfort cooking, now a spokeswoman for a diabetes drugmaker's health initiative, announced last week that she hid her Type 2 diabetes for about three years while continuing to cook up deep-fried cheesecake and bacon-and-egg burgers between doughnuts on TV.

Choosing to digest her ill health privately all those years, Deen's story is familiar to those in chef's jackets who already had gone public with the question few in their world love to talk about: How do you stay healthy while trying to earn a living making food?

On Thursday, a dozen obese chefs, restaurant owners, caterers and others will search for the answer. That's when the Food Network premieres "Fat Chef," which follows participants for 16 weeks as they struggle to lose weight and learn a healthier way of life with the help of trainers, nutritionists and therapists.

"You have this abundance of food all around you," said pastry chef Michael Mignano, who's one of the dozen. "You're doing parties, you have weddings. There's always a lot of food left over. You're constantly tasting, working late hours, eating late."

Mignano, 36, owns a bakery in Port Washington, New York. At 6 foot (1.83 meter) 2 inches (5.08 centimeters), he weighed about 500 pounds (226.8 kilograms) soon after he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes in 2010, before "Fat Chef" went into production last October. His resolve to do something about his weight grew stronger as the result of a different Food Network show on which he appeared in September, "Sweet Genius."

"I wasn't nervous about that show, but I was nervous about whether the jacket would fit me," said Mignano, who now weighs about 400 pounds (181.44 kilograms) and has a long road ahead to reach his goal weight of 250 pounds (113.4 kilograms). "Watching myself on that show, I was the fat guy. That's all I saw. I felt almost like a drunk seeing himself on the floor passed out."

Going public with his weight loss journey hasn't been easy for Mignano and others in similar unhealthy dire straits. As chefs, the constant food stimulation by sight, smell and taste was compounded by personal struggles and family obligations.

Art Smith, who doesn't appear on the show, is a child of fried chicken and other

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Southern staples like his old pal Deen. Like Deen, he was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes about three years ago.

Also 6 foot 2, Smith ballooned to 325 pounds (147.42 kilograms) while gorging on refined sugar, caffeine, PB&Js — anything that gave him an instant energy boost or filled him up at the end of an exhausting day as a chef for Oprah Winfrey.

Exercise? He could barely walk a block, until he decided to turn it all around and lost 118 pounds (53.52 kilograms). Now 51, the Jasper, Florida, native, restaurant owner, cookbook author and food TV personality has kept the weight off.

Smith has run marathons, eats oatmeal and egg whites for breakfast, drinks plenty of water and has expanded Common Threads, his healthy eating initiative for low-income kids. He declares: "I've got my sexy back!"

Obviously not all chefs struggle with obesity and serious health threats like diabetes, but most do think about weight and how to hold back the extra pounds.

Allison Adato, a senior editor and former food beat writer for People magazine, is out in April with a book, "Smart Chefs Stay Slim," offering insights and tips from three dozen of the biggest names in the industry.

"Paula Deen's revelation may mark a turning point for some viewers and diners," Adato said. "My hope is that this moment creates a broader awareness that the way a person eats does have an impact on his or her health. Fortunately, there are a lot of chefs who have already thought about how to balance a healthy lifestyle with enjoying wonderful food."

Surrounded by rich, decadent food and their need to earn a living from it, Adato's chefs stay fit by keeping hyper-aware of every calorie. Some balance out their food excesses over a few days, indulging one day, but "eating clean" the next. They know the difference between tasting the food they prepare without gorging on it, and exactly how much dessert to enjoy.

As a pastry chef, Mignano said his problem wasn't so much the chocolate he was surrounded by. It was the junk food he'd slam down before and after work.

Ally Vitella, 41, a New York City caterer, discovered she had Type 2 diabetes at the first health check-in for "Fat Chef." At 5-9, she weighed 345 pounds (156.49 kilograms) and was forced to sit guiltily by as her husband and mother-in-law lugged catering ovens and other equipment up and down the stairs of their Manhattan clients.

After a job, "You're kind of a scavenger. I was eating hors d'oeuvres for lunch and dinner. I would scoop up half a tray of food and eat it. We were ordering pizza and Chinese food at home because we were exhausted all the time," she said. "We cook things you're supposed to eat once in a while, but I was eating them every day."

Vitella, who lives in North Caldwell, New Jersey, dropped from a size 28 to a size 16

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during the show, losing nearly 60 pounds (27.22 kilograms). Her goal weight is 190, but the important thing, she said, is she can play again with her 7-year-old son and 9-year-old daughter.

"I've learn that tasting means tasting, not tasting the same dish five times," Vitella said.

Escalation of Type 2 disease in the U.S. has been closely tied to obesity. Roughly 23 million Americans are believed to have the most common Type 2 diabetes; patients' bodies either do not produce enough insulin or do not use it efficiently, allowing excess sugar, or glucose, to accumulate in the blood.

Deen, who's made a lucrative living as a TV chef by going over the top with butter, cream and sugar, faced a torrent of criticism when she disclosed her diabetes diagnosis and her contract to lend her face and recipes to "Diabetes in New Light," a project of the drugmaker Novo Nordisk. The campaign's website includes detailed information about Victoza, the drug Deen has taken for nearly five months.

Smith calls Deen's endorsement deal "a mistake, ill advised" but said her personal health and her style of cooking "are her own business." He said he dropped the weight and redefined his lifestyle for himself, but also to show the public that it CAN be done.

"At this moment, chefs in America, particularly those fortunate enough to be embraced by the public as celebrities, have enormous influence," he wrote in the foreword to Adato's book. "I've tried to use mine responsibly."

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