

## Introduction

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**MARION KANE:** Can you sit there? I have strict instructions.

**JOHN CATUCCI:** Is this your good side always?

**MARION:** Oh, yeah. It is actually.

**JOHN:** For the podcast listeners, she's actually sitting in my lap which is a bit forward...

**MARION:** (laughs)

**JOHN:** ... but I'm into it.

**MARION:** John Catucci is the funny charming host of the Food Network show *You Gotta Eat Here*. His enviable task: to kibitz with cooks and eat at restaurants serving down-home delicious food. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®, and welcome to "Sittin' In The Kitchen®." John Catucci was an award-winning comedian and actor for more than a decade before landing a foodie's dream job in 2012. Since then he and his fork have been travelling far and wide, boosting the popularity of local eateries wherever they go. We met at la Cubana on Ossington Avenue in Toronto.

## Interview

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**MARION:** So John, tell me a bit about yourself. You're a stand-up comedian?

**JOHN :** I was in a duo called The DooWops and we sing about Italian things. We sang a song about Mangia Cakes, which is what we call white breads.

**MARION:** We non-Italians.

**JOHN:** (Singing) "You introduced me to the ways of love and Kraft Dinner. You thought it was cute that I'd never seen cheese in a powdered form. I love the freckles on your

face and the paleness of your skin and the way you wore that Guns N' Roses t-shirt all ripped up and torn. My Mangia Cake girl. Sweet little Mangia Cake girl.”

**MARION:** That's beautiful. I got John Catucci to sing.

**JOHN:** David Mesiano and I performed as The DooWops for about 13 years. I was a working actor, so commercial work. I was on a kid's show for a while as well called *The Doodlebops*.

**MARION:** Did you grow up with a strong food culture in your home?

**JOHN:** Yeah for sure. Very strong food culture. Meals were very important. We always sat down as a family for our evening dinner meal and Sundays was the big feast. My dad would make a ragù with...

**MARION:** That's a Bolognese sauce?

**JOHN :** Our version wasn't so much like a Bolognese meat sauce. He would use the *spallo*, like a veal shoulder, and big chunks of it and cut it and slow-cook that in tomato sauce. Then the sauce would get imparted with that flavour of the shoulder. My dad would start it early in the morning so by 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon the meat was just falling off the bone. It was so succulent. The sauce was just to perfection. It would be ready around 2:00 and we wouldn't eat until 4:00 or something like that. My dad would always bring me a bowl of sauce with a panino into my room.

**MARION:** Bread...

**JOHN:** Bread. A nice Italian little bread. And he would just bring me a bowl and say, "Here. Don't tell anybody. I brought this for you. Just eat it."

**MARION:** Preferential treatment?

**JOHN:** I guess so. I was the only boy in the family but I am sure that he did the same thing to my sisters but didn't say anything to them either, right. "Shhh. Have this. Don't say anything. Don't worry." He loved feeding people. My dad, when we had the big feast meals – the Easter, the Christmas, all that stuff – he was the guy who did all those.

**MARION:** Here's the big question.

**JOHN:** What is it?

**MARION:** This is the big question.

**JOHN:** It's coming.

**MARION:** How do you choose a restaurant?

**JOHN:** It's mainly the research department at Lone Eagle Entertainments. They're the production company. They have a research department and they're word-of-mouth and people writing in and blogs and reviews. They're doing a whole bunch of stuff. They're checking all that out. A lot of people are still writing in requests for their favourite restaurants. I think that always works great because it's basically what the show is, right? It's me going into some town and somebody saying, "Hey. This is the place you've gotta eat." If I was coming from out of town, you'd bring me to your favourite restaurants. "You've gotta eat here, and this is why." So that's the main thing. Then there's times that we as crew will bring our ideas in. We've had this meal here or we've had a meal there. We were in Calgary and we were shooting at other restaurants and then we'd go to have a pizza at this place at Una Pizzeria, and we were like, "Oh. This is great. We should tell the office." And then we told the office and they did the research and it comes back and we shoot there. So that's pretty cool.

**MARION:** Talking of places you choose to shoot and visit and feature on *You Gotta Eat Here*, I've got a beef with you.

**JOHN:** Why? What's your beef?

**MARION:** Anna Mae's.

**JOHN:** Anna Mae's? What's the beef?

**MARION:** I can't get in now.

**JOHN:** (laughs). Really?

**MARION:** I discovered Anna Mae's...

**JOHN:** This is yours? How long ago was this?

**MARION:** We should explain, but I'm showing John the Food section that I produced when I was at the *Toronto Star* for 18 years. In June of 2000 I discovered this little Mennonite village and I discovered Anna Mae's.

**JOHN:** Oh my gosh, that's amazing. Our director Jim and his wife have a family farm up in that area.

**MARION:** Perth County in Southwest Ontario.

**JOHN:** Yeah. He keeps talking about this place and he kept talking about this place saying, "Oh my God, their Broasted Chicken. Their Broasted Chicken. Their Broasted Chicken."

**MARION:** What's Broasted Chicken?

**JOHN:** It's fried chicken but in a pressure cooker. It keeps the chicken so succulent and so moist, so crispy, but it does it so quickly and it's not oily at all. And then on top of the Broasted Chicken and all the classic comfort dishes. They have pies upon pies upon pies.

**MARION:** You're telling me this?

**JOHN:** I'm not telling you this. I'm telling your listeners this. I'm thanking you. Because of you we went there. Ahem.

**MARION:** (laughs). I can't get in now. It was difficult to get in...

**JOHN:** Lies. You can get in. Come on. I'm sure you can get in if anybody's getting in.

**MARION:** No. But I used to get into Anna Mae's. It was a little wait and now it's an hour wait because of you.

**JOHN:** Oh wow, that's weird. Great for them, that's amazing. I'm sorry that you can't get in. I feel guilty now that you can't get in, a little bit.

**MARION:** You should.

**JOHN:** I apologize. Can we go get food?

[Waitress]: What are we going to have?

**JOHN:** Can we share the Guava Short Ribs?

[Waitress]: Yes we can. Yeah.

**JOHN:** Ok, do that. The Medianoches? What's that?

[Waitress]: The Cuban Medianoche – what it is it's like a soft bun, it has Gruyère cheese, pulled pork, forest ham, chipotle mayo, cornichons and red onions.

**JOHN:** Ok. We need to do that.

**MARION:** John just said something between mouthfuls. I'm eating the conch fritter and it is out of this world. What did you say about the vibe?

**JOHN:** There was something about shooting the show that I realized that it's about the energy and the feeling of a place, right? It's not just about the food. Yes, it's the food. But if restaurant A and restaurant B are right next to each other and they have the exact same food and one's got a horrible environment and the other one's got a great welcoming feeling and good vibe, they make you feel like you're important and they make you feel like you're part of the family, that's the places that I love. That's the places that I love coming back to.

**MARION:** I totally agree. Have you got a couple of favourite places from the whole five seasons of *You Gotta Eat Here*? What stands out?

**JOHN:** There was a place in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, which was just beautiful. If you've never been in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, it's gorgeous. A beautiful drive out from Halifax. Magnolia's Grill - and she's lovely, the owner, she treated us like family right away. When we went back, we went to shoot another restaurant in town and we went back for dinner there. When we were in Halifax another time, we took a drive out just to have the Lobster Linguine. It was so delicious.

**MARION:** On your day off?

**JOHN:** Yeah, on our day off. It had this beautiful cream sauce, lots of lobster, lots of cheese. Just so creamy and rich and it just worked. All of it just worked so well. And she was lovely. Then we did some cod cakes which was her family recipe that she had

for years. That's one of the places that really stood out. That was the first season and it's still one of those magical moments. Lunenburg itself is gorgeous. It's a UNESCO site and it's an old city too. It's one of the oldest cities in Canada. It was really lovely.

**MARION:** Talking of gorgeous places - and I'm full, I can't believe how good this food is - you've just come back from Italy?

**JOHN:** Yeah. We were in Italy in September, shooting there in Rome and Florence.

**MARION:** Had you ever been?

**JOHN:** I had been. Last time I was there was 12 years ago with my now-wife, girlfriend at the time, and it was just so, so incredible. It's nice to go back when you weren't on so much of a budget (laughs).

**MARION:** What's the best thing you ate in Italy?

**JOHN:** We were in Rome at a place called Flavio al Velavevodetto. Basically, the restaurant translates into "I told you so." Flavio is the owner now but I think a family member had it or a former owner had it and then he bought it from him. That former owner - everyone said to him, "What are you opening up a restaurant for? You can't open up a restaurant. There's no way you're going to open up a restaurant, and he's like, "Don't worry, I'm going to do it." And so he totally named the restaurant "I told you so... I told you I'd do it". There's a tradition of when you take over a restaurant, you buy a restaurant from somebody else you don't change the name so Flavio added his name in front of the restaurant. He was such a gentleman. He was so great. One of those people that had to feed you. If you weren't being fed, he was upset. It was innate in him that he had to feed you and make sure you were a guest. Because this restaurant is his house and you're a guest in his house.

**MARION:** Do you ever feel this way, and I've felt this way when I go in my professional capacity to a restaurant, and the chef wants to show you everything he does, do you actually have difficulty eating all the stuff the chef presents to you?

**JOHN :** Like, just the amount of food he's bringing out to you? Oh yeah. I think it's known when people work in the industry, they kind of want to kill you with food, you

know what I mean? Sometimes I think chefs are like serial killers but slowly. They want to just slowly get at you over the years. But there are times when they bring out food, and bring out food, and bring out food, and we're like, "Oh, my God. What is happening? How are we going to do this?"

**MARION:** Do you eat very little before you go to a restaurant to shoot?

**JOHN:** Yeah. Also, when I'm shooting for the show now, I have to not eat everything. If I could go back to the early John first season, I would say, "John, you don't have to eat the whole plate. It's okay. It's all right." Because after we shot that first 13 episodes the plaid was getting tight. I told my director, his name is Jim Morrison, I was like, "Dude you have to tell me to stop eating." So after he'd call cut he'd be like, "Put your fork down. You don't need that. Put your fork down." So now when if I steal fries from people, he makes me do squats.

**MARION:** We're nearing the end of the food. Do you want to say anything else?

**JOHN:** Keep watching the show. It's really fun. I love doing it and I hope you love watching it. Make sure you go to those restaurants. Make sure you go to your little Mom and Pop shops, make sure you go to your locals. It's a tough business. If you love a place, show them that you love it.

**MARION:** Don't go to Anna Mae's when I want to go there.

**JOHN:** (laughs) Go everywhere but not Anna Mae's because Marion wants to eat there.

## **Conclusion**

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**MARION:** That was my conversation with John Catucci, host of *You Gotta Eat Here*. He is @johncatucci on Twitter. I'm Marion Kane, Food Sleuth®. You can find more stories like this one at [marionkane.com](http://marionkane.com) in iTunes. Thank you for listening.