

Gail Simmons Accepts Her Mandate to Eat Out

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Gail Simmons is best known as a judge on *Top Chef*, but her real love is food writing — she went to culinary school "knowing all along I wanted to write." Simmons apprenticed at the old [Le Cirque](#) and cooked at [Vong](#) ("this was the nineties — Vong was hot"), and now heads up special projects at *Food & Wine* where she says she has "a mandate to eat out." When she tapes *Top Chef* (premiering on Bravo on November 12), Simmons eats "copious amounts of bizarre ingredients and combinations," but we followed her New York Diet during an enviable rotation of restaurants and good eating in honor of Election Day.

Saturday, November 1

I was up at 6 a.m. and I did an appearance on the *Early Show* on CBS. They have a segment every Saturday called "Chef on a Shoestring," and there's always a theme. I had to make a meal for eight under \$80, and the theme was an Election Day party. I was eating red and blue tortilla chips with Swing State salsa, I made spicy red-curry chicken wings — Right or Left Wingers, McCain mini-mac and cheeses, and — are you ready for this one — Barack-*oli* with Cheddar-cheese dunks, and a shout-out to the wafflers: banana waffles with bananas in the mix for dessert. I wouldn't say I was eating a large amount, but I was prepping them and then cooking them on camera, so I was kind of tasting each one to make sure it was right.

I went back home, went to bed, woke up a few hours later, and my husband and I went to August for brunch — our favorite go-to brunch. I love sitting out in their back garden, the glassed-in area. We had a fruit salad of apples, grapes, and bananas with white Balsamic and tarragon, and then I had scrambled eggs with smoked salmon, and we shared a cup of Greek yogurt with preserved cherries. We thought we were stuffed, but they brought us pain perdue, French toast, made with this delicious French baguette with huckleberry sauce and whipped cream — so we had a few bites of that. I had a latte.

For dinner, I was celebrating a friend's birthday and we went to [Scarpetta](#). There were six of us, so we got a ton of food and we all shared. That included burrata, Scott Conant's famous polenta with mushroom fricassee, his scallop tartar, braised short ribs. We had this black macaroni dish that has sea urchin and seafood, and it's really delicious. Spaghetti with the simple tomato sauce, ravioli with foie gras, cavitelli with braised rabbit, and that was all to share. Then my husband and I shared the orata with smoked eggplant purée. My husband's a great eater but he works in the music industry. For wine, we had Negroamaro from Rosa del Golfo, a 2000 vintage from Puglia. And we had some Amedei chocolate cake for dessert. They're a chocolate producer out of Tuscany and probably one of the best chocolate producers in the world.

Sunday, November 2

Sunday morning I went to [City Bakery](#). It's another place I spend as much time as I can at. Maury Rubin's an old friend. I had veggies and assorted tasty bites from their salad bar and a skim latte.

I didn't have lunch. At the end of the day I went over to [Nikki Cascone's](#) restaurant, 24 Prince, and we had pizza night together. I came up with three special pizzas for the night. The first was a sweet-potato purée base with roasted cauliflower, mushrooms, ricotta salata, and fresh sage. The next was basic tomato with Pecorino and Comte cheese with sweet sausage topped with fresh arugula, and the third had a jalapeño-and-caramelized-onion relish with pulled roasted chicken, roasted fennel, and garlic. That's really what I ate for dinner, I had a few bites of each.

Then [Public](#) was having its five-year anniversary for friends and family. I've known those guys for many years. In fact, chef Brad Farmerie's wife is a good, old friend of mine, and I was there when they met. I had a fig Bellini and a venison slider at the party.

Monday, November 3

For breakfast I had a bowl of McCann's Irish organic oatmeal and a cup of green tea.

For lunch I ordered ['witchcraft](#). I do not get a discount. For \$10, I'm pretty good with paying. It's funny — I actually had a Tom week, and you'll see why later. My office is near Bryant Park, where they have a kiosk, and our office goes there all the time. I had the grilled Gruyère with caramelized onions and a cup of tomato soup. I had a cold so I was feeling like I needed some comfort food.

For dinner that night, my favorite fast dinner: The [Cleaver Company](#) in [Chelsea Market](#) makes these amazing pot pies you can buy frozen. Mary Cleaver is an exceptional caterer; she's really one of the pioneers in New York of sustainable cuisine. I had a chicken pot pie, and I made a salad with arugula, fennel, tomatoes, and cannellini beans. Then I had some red grapes for dessert.

Tuesday, November 4

Election day, big day, I had a banana and an organic coconut-apricot Nature's Path granola bar and a cup of coffee from the coffee cart outside.

For lunch, I had a Greek salad from the diner across from our office called the Red Flame. It's the meeting place for everyone at *Food & Wine* and American Express Publishing. It's just a classic New York diner. I love a diner.

Later that afternoon, I went down to the test kitchen. Having a test kitchen is a little bit dangerous, but also really fun; whenever I'm on a break, it's a good place to go. The three women who run our test kitchen are amazing, and were testing recipes for *next* year's Thanksgiving. We need to test the ingredients that are seasonal at that time. I ate part of a sticky bun, and I had some roasted Brussels sprouts, and a bite of a really delicious plum tart. I think it was — I don't know if I should tell you — it's from a chef in Chicago we like a lot. It was sort of a rustic tart, open, with full halves of plums that had been baked cut-side down and there may have been a bit of a red wine reduction in there; they were peeled but there was this beautiful, rich, Burgundy sauce that had a lot of great flavor. Our executive food editor approves recipes and has them tucked away and ready to go.

Election night I went to [Craftsteak](#). Tom had a special menu in the front bar. There was a big crew of us, and Tom was there too. I had an aquavit cocktail, the Craft Sunset, something like that. They had made some house-made beef jerky. I'm a crazy beef-jerky head. I love beef jerky; it's one of my favorite snacks. My family's from South Africa where there's a traditional snack called biltong, though it's not smoked or sweet, just cured and dried. We had deviled eggs, mac and cheese, and some oysters. When I went home later, my husband had ordered [Lassi](#) for dinner, so I had a few bites of what he was eating, this tamarind shrimp. And then I ended up eating a pear and then I had a Tim Tam. Do you know about the Tim Tams? When I was 19, I spent my summer in Australia — a lot of my family lives in Australia — and I went crazy for Tim Tams. They're the most delicious chocolate-covered cookie. The ones I have at home are caramel Tim Tams, so they're sort of a chocolate cookie with caramel center dipped in chocolate. *Somehow* Pepperidge Farm magically got their hands on them and are selling them at Target. They're exact. I'm trying to stretch out the box.

Wednesday, November 5

In the morning I had my oatmeal again and a coffee at the office.

For lunch I went to [Landmarc](#) in the Time Warner Center with our deputy wine editor, Ray Isle. Ray is a good friend and the most approachable wine geek you'll ever meet. I'm director of the Food & Wine classic in Aspen in June, and we start planning it a year in advance, so we were ironing out some details. We want him to do a burger and wine seminar and some special seminars for the connoisseur. We shared a half bottle of a Domaine Raspail-ay from the Rhone Valley, a Grenache blend, 2005. Then we shared a frisée aux lardons salad and a braised lamb sandwich, a side of roasted Brussels sprouts with bacon and a side if French fries.

For dinner, I worked really late. I left the office at about 9:30 and met my husband at [Ippudo](#). We shared an octopus sashimi, some shisito peppers, the avocado-tofu tartar, the chicken wings, and we shared a spicy tonkatsu ramen. They've mixed in the chile paste. I've been three or four times since it's opened. I'm going to Vietnam and Japan next week and we were sitting at the bar and grilling the cooks for good ramen shops in Tokyo, and they gave us a little list.