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Answering the Question, “Mommy, What’s for Dinner?” by Carol Toscano



There are things in life that seem to happen as if by magic. As if invisible forces get together behind our backs and plan things for us. They let us think these things are our ideas but, well...you know. We act like we have control but there are some mysteries that can't be chalked up to simple coincidence.

Case in point: a new cooking series for charity called *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, hosted by former *Top Chef* contestant Dave Martin. But, let's go back a bit further.

Meet Natasha Perez (photo, top), a young woman from Guam diagnosed with an aggressive form of Osteosarcoma, a bone cancer. When Natasha came to New York for treatment at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, she lived at Ronald McDonald House New York on East 73rd Street. Although Natasha was undergoing aggressive treatment, she never lost her hearty appetite. No matter what she went through in treatment, without fail, the question at the end of the day was always, "Mommy, what's for dinner?"



In the 18 months she lived in New York, Natasha ate her way through the city. It could have been Fettuccine Alfredo at Nino's on First Avenue or Japanese food at Y's on East 73rd Street, but mostly, dining was an experience for Natasha—one in which she gathered her people together. Her favorite place to eat was the Dining Room at Ronald McDonald House New York with friends and family. Sadly, at the age of 15, after a long, hard fight, Natasha lost her battle with Osteosarcoma.

Enter 4good Productions, a production company that brings the magic of Broadway to charitable organizations for their benefit. The brains behind 4good Productions combine the collective talents of Broadway actors Jen Waldman, Schele Williams and Di Ana Pisarri. "It's a foundation that's run like a

production company,” explains Di Ana. And, by the way, Di Ana is Natasha’s cousin.

Meanwhile, back at Ronald McDonald House New York on East 73rd Street, a massive and needed renovation of the Family Kitchens and Dining Room was underway. “There was a real need to create a friendlier, greener and certainly, a more ergonomic space,” says Wini Cudjoe, the House’s Director of Operations. “The most critical element was making sure the environment really had the feeling of home, complete with all of those things one would typically find in their own kitchens.” In 2009, with substantial support from donors and the community, Ronald McDonald House New York successfully completed the rebuild of the Family Kitchens and Dining Room. (See photo above).



In other words, if you build it, Dave will come.

Which brings us back to Celebrity Chef Dave Martin (left). Dave was looking for a charity to partner with for a long-term relationship. He had already had an introduction into the charity world with the Make a Wish Foundation and some other organizations but he really wanted a strong connection to an organization aligned with some specific philanthropic goals he had. At about the same time, 4good Productions began to look at new organizations to support. Di Ana suggested Ronald McDonald House New York. The idea was to do what 4good did best: produce a star-studded Broadway benefit for the House in Natasha’s memory. But, when they visited the House for a tour and saw the Kitchens, it immediately occurred to them there was something bigger at hand and the concept for Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner was born. “Natasha was a real foodie,” says Di Ana. “It just made sense.” Through a friend of a friend, they called Chef Dave, who immediately responded to the idea and agreed to host the series for at least a year.

When Dave realized what he could accomplish with a series like Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, he was excited and happy that he could work with an

organization that was focused on helping children, specifically pediatric cancer patients who could benefit from a combination of nutritional initiatives and fun. “It was the perfect opportunity,” he says. “I was thinking about what I wanted to accomplish and suddenly, this opportunity came up. It’s something I really want to do.”

“I have a lot of ideas about where this could go,” he says. “It could be a meal for a small group of people or an evening of cookie decorating with the children. The focus is on spending time with the kids and families to take their minds off of everything they’re going through. I’d like it to be interactive, to inspire them to get into the kitchen more often. Once people see something and are engaged in the process, they’ll get more involved. And you never know who’ll come in!”



Dave is currently working on a line of healthy foods for kids. He says he’s learned a lot since his *Top Chef* days. “Most importantly,” he says, “I’m learning about what charity means. It’s not always about giving that \$1 million check. People can donate an hour of time, a pot or pan or a bag of groceries. It’s what each person can do to help. I feel like I’m doing the things I’m supposed to be doing especially if I can get out and share my food with people, particularly the kids.”

The series will launch on Friday, February 5th at Ronald McDonald House New York and will continue on a monthly basis over the next year. It will feature a different celebrity chef each month, on-site, to cook dinner with the kids and to raise funds and necessary kitchen supplies for Ronald McDonald House on East

73rd Street. “We’ve got some big names on our list of guest chefs,” says Schele Williams. “So stayed tuned!” The evening will also include a musical performance by the group Broadway Inspirational Voices.

Joining Chef Dave for the launch will be fellow (former) *Top Chef* contestant Andrea Beaman, a natural foods chef and host of *Fed Up!*, an organic, whole foods cooking show on the Veria TV Network. Andrea teaches people how to cook to cure physical ailments through alternative nutrition, natural healing and sustainable, green living. In addition to being a former contestant on the hit Bravo TV show, *Top Chef*, she’s currently a food and health expert on CBS News.

For more information on Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, to make a donation to Ronald McDonald House New York, to see a Wish List of needed Kitchen supplies or to attend a Cooking 4good event, please visit www.rmdh.org.

For information on 4good Productions, please visit www.4goodproductions.com.

For more information on Chef Dave Martin, please visit www.chefdavemartin.com.

Kitchen photo courtesy of Marian Goldman

Tags: [4good Productions](#), [Andrea Beaman](#), [bone cancer](#), [Bravo TV](#), [Broadway](#), [Carol Toscano](#), [CBS News](#), [Dave Martin](#), [Di Ana Pisarri](#), [Fed Up!](#), [Guam](#), [Guess Who's Coming to Dinner](#), [Jen Waldman](#), [Marian Goldman](#), [Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center](#), [Natasha Perez](#), [Nino's](#), [Osteosarcoma](#), [Ronald McDonald House New York](#), [Schele Williams](#), [Top Chef](#), [Wini Cudjoe](#), [Y's](#)

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