



A Conversation with Dina Deleasa-Gonsar

Dish it Girl

Q. You're the woman behind the popular blog Dish it Girl, and some also know you from your family's television show on E! and being recognized on Hallmark's Home & Family as the Best Home Cook. But Dish it Girl came first. Tell us how you got started with Dish it Girl.

A. Dish it Girl started about ten years ago, in its most primitive form. I was in grad school for counseling and psychology, and as a fun thing, I started blogging before I really knew what blogging was. I was keeping a running list of my favorite restaurants, dining experiences. Then, when my family and friends asked me for a recipe for a dish that I either brought to a gathering or made for dinner, instead of writing it out a hundred different times, I'd put it on the website and tell them to find it there. That was before social media was a thing—I just really loved food, loved cooking for people, and such a big part of my life as being from an Italian family. My dad would often bring me around as his little sidekick to different holes-in-the-walls or different bakeries we'd find while driving around, so my love for eating out and finding a cool spot was really ingrained in me from activities I did with my dad. I wanted a place to remember those—I didn't want to forget—and many people would ask me for recommendations.

I ended up on television with my family for a little bit as part of Married to Jonas. My sister is married to Kevin Jonas, and we did two seasons on E!. I had to get social media accounts on Instagram and Twitter to be a part of the show, so that's how I got started on social media. After we stopped the show, I had still been posting here and there about different things I was making Brian for dinner or where we were going out to eat (again, this is before the big social media influencer thing started), but I got my first partnership with Philadelphia Cream Cheese. They were like, 'Hey, we'll pay you to create a recipe and post some pictures of it around Easter,' and I was like, 'Oh, okay.' At this time, I was working as a school counselor; I would work during the day, and then at night, I would come home and cook for these brands and create recipes. It really took on a life of its own, and it was just a part-time thing. I started getting more and more work that way, and many people were emailing me asking for recipe suggestions for different occasions. I started seeing that a younger generation, too, was interested in cooking that wasn't

your typical homemaker. So that's how my audience started to grow; it was kind of twofold, from being on television and then connecting with them over recipes and advice.

I named the site Dish it Girl because I was a counselor, and I thought it would be a cute name for dishing out advice, a play on that 'you can dish it but you can't take it' kind of thing. But it ended up working for my food experiences and recipes, too.

Q. What did the process of becoming Hallmark Home & Family's Best Home Cook look like?

I'm not one for food competition shows; they make me nervous—it's typically not the way I like to cook. At first, I submitted a video. I wasn't going to enter, but we were away on a family vacation, and my husband was like, 'Here, why don't you make XY&Z real quick and throw it up there. It can't hurt,' so I was like, 'Fine, no big deal.' So I made some meatballs, he filmed it, and we threw it up on the competition site. And lo and behold, they picked my entry along with a couple of others, and all of a sudden, I was going out to California to the Home & Family studios to cook my Dish on their set! It was so exciting to me. I loved that show and the whole thing; going out to California and spending time at Universal was very cool.

While I was there, it morphed into more of a competition, which we didn't expect. Each day we were there, they gave us more information. So the first time we flew out, we cooked our Dish, went home, and then we came back, and they had us compete in a Chopped-style competition. I think we cooked for two days; they had set up some tables out back, and they were like, 'Give us your list of ingredients, here are the ingredients we have on hand and...GO.'

I panicked inside, but I put my head down and cooked. I put my little earbuds in my ears, and it stretched my abilities and my confidence in terms of what I thought I was or wasn't capable of—I was basically like, well, you've got to do this, here and now, you have no choice. Surviving that whole thing and then winning was just such a huge accomplishment for me. I would have never said I could do something like that and really would never have knowingly set myself up to do it.

The great part about it was that I formed a really great relationship with the show, and they had me come back more often. It was fun to kind of get to be a part of the cast there, and then I got pregnant with Siena, and Home & Family is off the air now, which is super sad. But the experience helped give me more confidence in what I was doing and opened up more doors television-wise.

Q. In your bio on Instagram, you say, "REAL life, not lifestyle." What do you mean by that? Why is that approach important to you?

As I started Dish it Girl, it took on a life of its own—I've always been learning along the way. I never started an Instagram account or a blog under the idea that I'm going to become an 'influencer.' The word makes me uncomfortable, but not because it's bad—I know a lot of them work really hard, and it's definitely a category that I have to either be in or out. I never wanted anyone to land on my corner of the internet, click on my photos or my stories, and feel bad or frustrated or depressed in the sense of, 'I wish my life were like hers. She looks like she has it all together.'

You know, Instagram became this very curated thing of everyone's beautiful homes, they're showing their new playroom that's all bright and white, and I'm like, 'Where are the toys all over the floor?!' It's not that you can't have nice things or live a nice life, but there's such a level of curation on Instagram that it's not real life—or I guess you could say it's real life for such a small percentage of people. It's not real for most people.

When I had my daughter Siena, I went through a difficult postpartum period, and I think that was the point where I saw many moms seemingly doing it all. You know, they were 'in the trenches with me' and 'kind of stressed,' but I didn't realize that the reason they could still curate their beautiful feeds and make it to their different appointments and shoot their beautiful photos was because they had a team of people behind them. And you know, that's a choice, and it's an excellent choice; I just felt like I wanted and needed to show people both sides of it.

There are some days where I might have help, and that's why I can do the little bit that I do, and then there are most days where I don't - I'm just doing things by the skin of my teeth, or they're just not getting done.

I myself can't keep up with influencers; it might look like it on my feed because I sometimes make it that way for the work part of it, but most of the time, I don't have time for outfit of the day, all every day. Again, there's nothing terrible about that, there are just a couple of different kinds of people in this world, and it's okay if you're not like the #1, do-it-all, full-time influencer type.

I want to be a place where people see both sides—you see the good, and you see the less filtered. I don't want to be a constant filter in people's faces. I don't want a new mom to come on to my feed and feel the same way I felt when I looked at some people.

Q. Speaking of motherhood, how has motherhood changed or influenced the work you do with Dish it Girl? Has it changed it, shaped it, redirected it, etc.?

A. Becoming a mom changes everything because you're no longer just concerned about yourself and what's good for you. There are so many parts to that—there's Dish it, Girl, as a business owner, there's Dish it Girl as someone who cooks and creates recipes, there's Dish it Girl that lands on TV sometimes, so all parts of that had to modify. I had to make choices.

Sometimes I feel like people don't necessarily want to talk about the black and white of the choices you have to make when you become a mom, and you're deciding whether to work or not work. Every day I have to make choices where something, in a sense, suffers in one way. If I choose to work more, that means it's less attention I'm choosing to pay Siena; and vice versa. There are some days where I just can't get to my work because I've chosen that everything with my family is more important, and that means my work will suffer. I have to make choices more often.

It's helped me become better at time management, but I still haven't become good at it, so I don't know if that's something I can really say!

But motherhood has also brought a whole other level of fun because now I have a little sous chef in the kitchen, and she truly is interested in food. Now that we've been working from home a lot, it's been fun to see her in her playroom, and she's talking to herself. I go in, and she's got all of her pots and pans set up in front of her, and she's acting as if she's talking to the camera or computer, and she has all of her ingredients out. I do love it when she sees me cooking or starting to film something, and she pushes up her chair, and she's like, 'Let me help, let me help!'

It's good for her to see what I do, on the one hand, and I think it's causing me to modify the way I cook to be more versatile. I'm trying new things because I want her to try new things. I present dishes differently, finding new ways to make it easier for all of us to sit down and eat together without making 700 things—it's more like ten things now instead of 700.

Q. As someone who grew up loving food and it being such an integral part of your childhood, what has it been like to get to share that love of food with your own child?

A. One of my earliest memories is waking up from a nap, and I could smell what my mom was cooking for dinner. Or I would come downstairs and see how she had set the table or was getting ready for a family dinner. And for some reason, that always really stayed with me; it was such a comforting thought. Certain smells like garlic and olive oil hitting the pan—you know how people want a glass of wine and a bubble bath? Like, I want a pot of gravy. Which I guess is kind of weird, but that's my self-care.

I want Siena to have that comforting feeling; I want her to have the same thing where she wakes up from her nap and knows I'm getting dinner ready. I love the anticipation of getting ready for a

holiday or just a Sunday dinner; the shopping, the prepping, the busyness of my mom, my grandma, and my aunts in the kitchen, everybody helping, laughing, talking. I just felt like that was such an important tradition, even though many wouldn't consider it a big deal. And now, as adults, we all do what we can to still get together on Sunday. I'm really very thankful that my mom put in the work and effort to gather everyone because I see it is a lot of work and effort, but it does create strong bonds, strong memories, and I want that for my daughter.

Being my dad's sidekick, his little buddy, his ride-along, his partner in taste-testing crime—he was always excited when he'd talk about food, and I guess that really rubbed off on me. All of his friends knew to go to Bucky for a good restaurant recommendation, and you know, I just kind of took over the same vibe.

Q. Food has obviously played a significant role in your life, ever since you were little. But as you've mentioned, you were working as a school counselor when you started Dish it Girl. As a child, did you ever consider that your work or career would involve food? What did childhood Dina want to be when she grew up?

A. Actually, no! Because at the time, I thought that if you worked in the food space, you had to be a chef. Which is wonderful, but I didn't want to be away from my family on holidays, and I worked in a restaurant a couple of times, and I saw how hard that was; it was really like a 24/7 type of job. Really, at the heart of it, I just loved feeding my family and friends and anyone who needed it. I wasn't aware of all of the different opportunities there were in working in the food industry. I didn't know about food styling, or food photography, or cookbook writing; those things I just didn't know about.

Actually, when I was younger, even until high school, I really, very badly wanted to be on Broadway and do musicals. That sounds like such a dork thing now, but that's what I secretly wanted in my life. I got scared off by the audition processes; I did a little bit of it and was good at it, but I thought I needed to have a more of a secure kind of path in life. But I would have ended up veering off it anyway, so maybe I should have cut the cord earlier.

I did end up using those skills later on—from both Broadway and my counseling career; it's funny how with every different turn in my path, I've wound up using a piece of it to get to where I am now.

Q. In addition to food, you also talk about family and faith on the blog. We've touched on family already, so tell me about the role your faith plays in everyday life and in what you're doing over at Dish it Girl.

A. I would be scared to know where I would be and what I would be like without my faith. Just at the very basis of it, life is hard. It has so many twists and turns, ups and downs, highs and lows; everybody knows that. I don't know how people do it without God.

I've seen Him work so constant in my life and in the lives of people around me, whether they know it or not. When I had Siena, and I remember being in the hospital, I was there for three days, and they were monitoring me, and nobody was sure what was going on. It was very unexpected—she was two months early—and no one could quite figure it out. I remember being so thankful that I was where I was in my relationship with God: I had been reading, I had been studying, I had been in prayer prepping for her arrival. I'm so glad that I put the time and effort into that because I could clearly see that I would need that more than I knew, and even though I went through a hard time, it was a hard time, but it wasn't a hopeless time.

I think that's the big difference when you have faith when you have God in your life: things may be hard, things may be difficult, but they're not hopeless. And I think that makes a big difference when push comes to shove.

I feel like everything I do have with Dish it Girl—even though I'm not a pastor or a minister—God's used it to open doors to put me in touch with people that maybe wouldn't have had a godly person pass through their lives. It's given me opportunities to plant seeds; you're not beating people over the head with the Bible, you're just planting seeds by being as good as you can in your everyday life, making the best choices you can, and I just felt like being open and honest about what I was going through might touch someone else's life. Who knows, maybe years later, something they heard from me could resonate, and they could decide to bring themselves and their family to church; I don't know. But it's a chance that I'm willing to take.

I can't share about food and family without faith; because Sundays are all about going to church and then having macaroni and meatballs. So I have to show the faith side of it, too.

Q. What is something you want your current and future audiences to know about you? If they learn one thing about Dina, what is it you want them to know?

A. I think I try to portray that everything is a process; everything is a journey; it's not overnight. Whether you're dealing with a mental health issue, a work issue, a family issue, I don't just say a prayer and like poof! It happens.

I try to be honest about it, but I hope they know that every day I'm working on it. Whatever it may be—whether it's myself and my attitude. Whether it be my mom skills, my cooking skills. Whether it be my relationship with my husband, my family, my relationship with God, I'm

accepting that I'm a work in progress and that progress doesn't stop. Some days you're going to do it, and some days you're not, and that's okay.

Q. When you're not cooking or developing recipes or appearing on television, what do you enjoy doing?

A. Sleeping. No, I'm kidding! Ever since I became a mom, I'm like, 'what are hobbies?'

I do like to work out, but I'm not like a fitness queen...

I do like to entertain friends and family, but that's still cooking...

I don't craft anything, I can't even color in the lines...

My days of dancing the night away don't really happen anymore...

I can garden, but I'm definitely not Martha Stewart...

I hang out with my family way too much, I think, is what I'm realizing. I guess Siena is my hobby. Hanging out with her is my hobby and watching Bluey.

Q. What will people find on Dish it Girl that they won't find anywhere else?

A. There's always someone out there doing something similar, so that's very challenging for me. I know I'm not the only person giving an unfiltered look into every area of life. I'm very honest about all topics, including marriage, being a mom, raising a family, working.

The whole focus of my blog is not just entertaining or throwing picture-perfect parties, but at the heart of it, I want you to feel confident at the very least in sitting your family down together and finding that time together, whether it's five minutes with a bowl of cereal poured for breakfast or it is a more in-depth thing like a Sunday dinner.

I'm trying to give people a dose of both; I'm not only giving them a recipe to help them feed people, but I'm also trying to provide them with the confidence and encouragement to keep moving forward in whatever it is they're doing. Whether it's their day or their next hour. And not to sound too corny, but I'm about feeding their soul as well as feeding their tummy.

Q. What is your go-to recipe for entertaining a group?

A. I love lasagnas or baked pastas. I feel like you can never go wrong; there are so many different ways you can make them—you can make them vegetarian and make them with meat. There are so many different combinations. You can really have fun and play with it.

My favorite is baked penne vodka, and that's been a hit lately. And then another good one is butternut squash, goat cheese, and sage lasagna. I also have a short-rib lasagna that's really popular around fall and wintertime. It's something that you can make ahead, but it's still kind of impressive, and it always makes a large quantity. That's what I love about it; it's make-ahead and large quantity, so it's less hands-on time while you have guests in the house, it's always comforting, and it's very rare that you find someone that doesn't like a baked pasta dish. It always has a lot of nostalgia attached to it, too, so that always makes people feel good.

Q. If you could only pick one Dish to eat for the rest of your life, what would it be?

A. I think I would go really simple. I always love a Caprese salad. I know it's basic; I know it's simple. But I always love, love, love when you get a good tomato; that is just like the best thing in the world. My dad always made homemade mozzarella, and when you get homemade mozzarella, and it's warm and chewy right after being made, that paired with a really beautiful tomato from a garden, that's just like a good day.

Q. Tell me about the latest projects you're working on. What's next for you and DishItGirl?

We just started putting out Home Cook Hustle, and that's been really exciting. We film those around every six weeks, and the fun part of that is that we're taking suggestions from the Dish It Girl community. They submit what they have in their pantries and refrigerators that they don't know what to do with. Each episode, I get to FaceTime with somebody, and I get to connect with them in real-time, which is really nice and exciting. That's with a newer food and lifestyle network that came out, Food Addicts.

I've recently done a lot of podcasts. I'm just finishing up some work with Hellmann's, which has been great. We did some recipes together, which turned out really good, and I've been putting those videos up, which has been fun.

I'm working with my sister, Kathleen. We designed these shirts for charity.

Mostly I've been working on many recipes, a lot of content, filming Home Cook Hustle, and seeing where it's going to go next.

Q. What encouragement do you want to share with people about food and cooking?

A. It's not just about eating or cooking. You're creating a memory, whether you know it or not, even with just a bowl of cereal. You sat down, with your significant other, with your kid, face to face, you've had that five minutes, and even that five minutes is super important as they go off to

school, as they start their day. The small, little things that you think are insignificant are what create all the puzzle pieces together that form the big picture of that relationship.

I think that's why I make such a big deal out of food; it's not just about the ingredients or the Dish that comes out; it's the acts and the thoughts behind it all.

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