



**Gravy Boat: My Week on the High Seas With Paula Deen and Friends**  
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She hates looking at veins.

This is one of the many things I learned about Paula Deen in late January, when I spent seven days living just a few yards from her, aboard a 1,047-foot-long floating shopping mall called the *Celebrity Reflection*.

We were both traveling on a cruise that was her-themed. The voyage was an excellent field trip for learning things about Paula Deen. In the week I spent aboard the January 2014 Eastern Caribbean Paula Deen Cruise I learned that besides hating veins, she paints watercolors in her bathroom, loves playing the slots, recently acquired one goldendoodle—Gus—and is "fixin' to get another," and uses chopped mini Reese's Peanut Butter Cups in her peanut butter pie (this last revelation elicited an awed gasp from the crowd at the 1:00 p.m. cooking demo).

I learned that the weirdest place Paula Deen has ever had sexual congress with her second husband Michael Groover, according to Paula Deen, is on a train traveling from New York City to Savannah, Ga.

This week, the *Wall Street Journal* confirmed what Deen had referred to on the cruise with cryptic excitement as "a big announcement": Paula Deen Ventures has received an investment of between \$75 million and \$100 million

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20140319015839/http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304558804579377272123745740>) from a private-equity firm called Najafi Cos., and is in talks to return to television. According to its literature, Najafi Cos. frequently invests in industries that are "out of popular favor."

In June of last year, Deen fell out of popular favor, becoming an overnight pariah after acknowledging in a deposition for a discrimination lawsuit that she had contemplated throwing an antebellum-style plantation wedding for her younger brother Bubba in 2007. More explosively, she admitted in the same deposition that she had used racist slurs 27 years ago. The suit was dismissed, but not before Deen had lost an estimated \$12.5 million in earnings. Endorsement deals were dropped; contracts were allowed quietly to expire; partnerships were suspended "for now" (forever).

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One company, however, doubled down on Deen in her hour of need: Alice Travel, which has coordinated five "personality" cruises with the chef since 2010. On June 25, in the midst of the bad press blitz, a spokesperson for Alice announced that the New Jersey-based company was not only continuing its relationship with Deen—it was adding a second cruise date mid-summer due to "the amazing response we've had in the past years from Paula's fans."

Public reaction to the cruise announcement was split between indignation and encouragement; either way, everyone forgot about it quickly because it was summer and we had other things to do. But the thing about making headlines in June by announcing a cruise in January is that, come January, those headlines must materialize into a real trip with embarkation times, and cabin assignments, and nausea medication, and paying customers, and paid personalities—even if no one is paying attention anymore.

But I was. So I booked a ticket. I wanted to know what life was like in the Paula Deen Universe half a year later. I wanted to see who was willing to spend, at minimum, roughly \$3,000 to support a downtrodden millionaire. I wanted to see if there were any black people.



The Celebrity *Reflection* departed from Miami on the afternoon of January 18, with scheduled stops in the capital cities of Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, and St. Maarten. The parts of the journey between landfalls are ambitiously described on the Paula Deen cruise website (PaulaDeenCruise.com) as "fun-filled days at sea."

The afternoon before the cruise sets off, I fly to Miami. On the plane, I sit next to a woman who talks to me from the moment she sits down. When the plane lands, she tells me "I'm sorry we didn't start talking sooner," presumably referring to the time period before she and I arrived at the airport, or expressing her regret that she and I were not old friends prior to meeting. Her husband offers me a granola bar, which I decline, and then some dried meat, which I also decline, and then the granola bar again, which I accept.

The next morning, I board a shuttle bus, which is extremely cramped. A few people sport matching purple T-shirts that read "Cookin' UP SOME FAMILY fun" in lime-green-and-silver holographic letters (probably they are together); almost everyone wears the look of vague apprehension that naturally casts itself upon the brow of a person forcibly separated from her luggage. I am told later that a woman standing in the center of the bus begins to hyperventilate about halfway through the brief ride, wailing aloud, "I'VE GOT TO GET OFF THIS BUS. I'VE GOT TO GET OFF THIS BUS." I am unable to hear her over all the singing.

There are two other reporters on the trip: one woman is freelancing for an online outlet; the other is employed by a tremendously popular print weekly. We range in age from 23 to 38. I hit it off with the online gal as soon as I meet her in the lobby of the hotel we stayed at in Miami, and within five minutes of exchanging names, we are working the small crowd like senatorial candidates, shaking hands, riffing off one another's jokes, and promising to provide hooch for all assembled, okay ladies? By Day 2, sneaking Bailey's by the pool, it feels like she and I are members of the same bachelorette party. By Day 4, analyzing our childhoods as we float in the swimming-pool-turquoise waters of Magens Bay in St. Thomas, it feels like we are on our honeymoon. By Day 6, she has invited me to her sister's wedding. The other reporter is on the ship as well.

Early on in the voyage, Paula's publicist makes it clear that she wouldn't have had to come on the cruise if we three hacks hadn't all decided to take a January vacation with Paula Deen. (Later, she hedges her remarks, saying "maybe" she would have chosen to come anyway.)

I ask if I can interview Paula. The publicist politely denies my request, though she does drop the same prepared off-the-cuff line about Paula's relationship to her fans into conversation with the three of us so many times I can only assume she wants it to appear in each of our write-ups as "a source close to Deen revealed..." Here it is as a word jumble: *fans fans love loves people Paula her some having*.



*The afternoon of Paula Deen's Cooking Demo is chilly and windy, but the chicken is wrapped in bacon and lacquered in cream sauce.*

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At capacity, the *Reflection* carries 3,030 passengers. Of that, 139 of us are there for the January 2014 Eastern Caribbean Paula Deen Cruise. (In past years, the Deen group has been larger. Paula is fixated on the attendance drop-off—"I was kinda worried that the group on this cruise was so small," she says over and over again, "but I really love it!" She also assures us that the second cruise, in July, "will probably be crazy.") The main differences between our vacation experience and the vacation experience of the non-Deen cruisers is that we have exclusive access to a number of Paula Deen events, and also that we are paying several hundred dollars more per person for staterooms identical to theirs. We are distinguished from other passengers by our green or blue name tags featuring the smiling face of Paula Deen, and by our complimentary Paula Deen Cruise totebags.

The average Deen cruiser is a woman in or fast approaching her sixties, slightly overweight but not obese. She was likely born (or spent a great deal of her life) in the part of the Southern United States that could be colloquially referred to as "Dixie," but may live somewhere else now. This is almost certainly not her first cruise, and there is a 1 in 4 chance it is not her first Paula Deen cruise. She is either widowed or divorced. She thinks Paula got a bum deal. She is wearing at least one thing that is the color aquamarine. She is white.

There are outliers. I quickly make friends with an alpha from South Dakota who first becomes dismayed at the trip's lack of organization the morning of the shuttle bus and remains that way for approximately 2,126 nautical miles. She is fond of peering warily at the gray-haired men and women crowding Deck 14 near the complimentary hot dog and hamburger grill and observing in incredulous tones that she and I are "the youngest ones on this boat," which, though she is my senior by more than 30 years, is technically true, if you limit the sample to passengers who have paid to sail as part of the Paula Deen cabal. Her husband, a ramrod straight-standing white-haired man recently retired from a government job, demonstrates a unique talent for being able

to stare out at the horizon without moving or speaking for hours at a time. I spend the next few days considering his inner monologue, wondering exactly what I am watching him see. (Eventually I settle on: himself, in his younger days, discreetly killing people.) I like the South Dakotans a lot.

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The oddest character traveling in the Paula Deen group is a man named Brad Turner, alias: The Grill Sergeant. If that name sounds vaguely familiar, it's probably because it's a brilliantly devised marketing coup of a name designed to sound like the kind of name you have definitely heard before, even though you are, in fact, probably hearing it for the first time. Turner was one of the stars of *The Grill Sergeants*, a cooking show that debuted on the Pentagon Channel in 2007 and ran for three seasons (funded by the Department of Defense) before being canceled. Like any wannabe-TV cooking personality, he has cultivated an arsenal of flashy trademarks (including but not limited to: singing while cooking, coining unnecessary culinary terms, and referring to salt as "ooh!"), so that talking to him is like talking to a person who is, at that very moment, inside a television.

Brad is African American. Paula Deen is very happy to see him.

According to a legend they both repeat numerous times over the course of the trip, Paula and Brad met last September at the Metropolitan Cooking and Entertaining Show in Dallas. A detail that both neglect to mention: The MetroCooking shows (a series of events held in three cities) marked Deen's first public appearances since being fired from the Food Network three months prior. As the story goes, Brad was alone on stage, singing a song he had just dedicated to Paula; Paula, in another part of the auditorium, heard his voice and, wonderstruck, rushed the stage to see what angelic creature was capable of producing such a melody. They met. They danced. A Grill Officer and a Lady.



*The Grill Sergeant and Michael place a beer can into the butt of a chicken at Michael's BBQ Demo. Paula bows out early to go to the casino, but not before wishing everyone the best.*

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Now, Brad is a fine singer. He's fine. As far as singing while cooking goes, he might even be great, because that is a sort of multitasking at which not everyone excels. Is it feasible that, upon hearing Brad's voice echoing across a large exposition space, a person might be compelled to seek out the source of that singing? Certainly. People like all kinds of things and, according to Brad, Brad is a world-class singer. Regardless of how they came together, he and Paula have reason to stay that way: One of them could use a famous friend right about now, and one of them could do with a black one.

The most confusing interaction between Paula and Brad happens the night we pull out of Miami, when the Grill Sergeant is called upon to entertain the passengers assembled at the Welcome Aboard Cocktail Party (open bar), while we wait for Paula to make her first appearance. Like something out of a story we will hear a half dozen times over the course of our seven-day Caribbean adventure, Brad starts to sing "My Cherie Amour," and there, all of a sudden, is Paula, entranced by his voice, rushing the stage to get a better look. She smiles; she dances with her bodyguard, a perpetually baseball-capped African-American man named Hollis Johnson; she waves to the crowd. She is delighted, as always.

After a few seconds, it hits her: This singing black man is a singing black man she has met before.

"Michael!" she exclaims to her husband, Michael (and the room), "It's the Grill Sergeant! No one told me he was coming!"

"I can't believe they kept you a secret from me!" she calls out to Brad after his song. "What a wonderful surprise!" It is indeed something of a marvel that Paula's handlers were able to keep Brad's presence secret from her.

The next day Brad is called upon to kill time at "Paula Deen's Cooking Demo," while the audience waits for the Paula Deen of the event name to be made manifest.

"Miss Paula had favor on me," he says into his microphone headset. (The audience is fairly small; perhaps 40 people.) "She said 'Brad, would you come on the cruise?' in that wonderful accent of hers. And I said, 'Yes ma'am.' No matter what she calls me, I'll be there saying 'Yes ma'am.'"

I ask Paula's publicist—an elegantly attired blowout-blonde whose children play British sports with the children of movie stars at her home in Los Angeles—to clarify the nature of the invitation. Was it a surprise for Paula, or was it a surprise for Brad that it was a surprise for Paula? She tells me Paula probably invited him and then forgot.

At Paula's Pajama Brunch, Brad performs a rendition of the gospel number "He Touched Me" "a cappella" by singing along to a recording of the track while it plays in his headphones. Before bursting into song, the Grill Sergeant humbly warns the room—which surely has never before contained so very many yards of pink and leopard pajama fabrics—that, if you are an easy crier, now would be the time to get those napkins ready. By the time he finishes, there is not a wet eye in the house. (Except Brad's.)

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**One afternoon, as I am taking a hot dog by the pool, a member of the Celebrity events staff announces into a microphone that the "Extreme Race Challenge" is about to begin.**

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In addition to Brad, there are four paying passengers in our group who are visibly African American (not counting at least one half-black sleeper cell agent who can pass for white—me): three women and one man, split into groups of two. All four are repeat Paula cruisers. I speak to each of them, briefly, at one time or another. None of them remarks upon the fact that there are not many black people here on the Paula Deen cruise, or gives any indication that this is the sort of thought that should ever enter one's mind. All four appear to be having a fine time, though the female couple skips many events. Their absence is easily noticed, because they are The Black People. One tells me later that people always ask them where they were.

Everyone on the boat is racist and nice. Including me.

The non-Deen cruisers are racist. The amiable mother of a former Miss Virginia is racist and has a tenuous grasp of the concept of slavery: "Don't I see [Paula] walking around with a black fella? He's her bodyguard or something? That right there shows she's not racist." The urbane gay couple visiting from Los Angeles is racist: "Filipinos are pushy," one of them explains shortly after telling me he is "not okay with" Deen.

The Deen cruisers are racist, dismissing out of hand the notion that Paula's use of the n-word was somehow offensive to black people.

I am racist, because I get upset at the black people in our group for not acting like I think black people should act on the Paula Deen cruise (i.e. frosty and indignant; or at the very least incredulous).

One afternoon, as I am taking a hot dog by the pool, a member of the Celebrity events staff announces into a microphone that the "Extreme Race Challenge" is about to begin.

People on the boat speak of the very public fall of Paula's cooking empire in vague, genteel terms. Paula tells us she and her family had "a rough, rough summer." Cruisers use language like "the horribleness," "that awful time," "that whole mess," and "the brouhaha" to describe the fall of her peculiar institution. An oft-repeated complaint is that Paula "got a raw deal," and was too zealously penalized for something she said 27 years ago.

Though she never says as much, Paula seems to agree. In contrast to the slapdash, much-derided, remorseful apology videos (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140319015839/http://bit.ly/1jEI61z>). Deen's camp uploaded to YouTube in the midst of the fallout, Paula's tone is now one of perseverance. Seven months ago, she told Matt Lauer she was not a racist. Now she tells the passengers in Michael's Club—located on Deck 5, Aft—that she is not "a quitter."

The closest Paula comes to commenting directly on the recent controversy is when, during the Q-and-A portion of a cooking demonstration, a woman asks Paula about her recent significant weight loss (last January, she told *Woman's Day* she had shed 36 pounds; she still refers to herself, in the third person, as "a fat girl."). Paula takes the opportunity to put media lies—which she pronounces *lahz*—on blast.

Her name, she says, was falsely linked to a Dr. Oz-endorsed dietary supplement.

"Absolutely not," she says. "I'm not familiar with that, but I know that they attached my name to it."

"It is not true," she continues. "You cannot believe everything that you read. And I can't believe that the law allows people to do things like that. But, you know, our laws are set up... our laws our set up to protect the guilty. I mean, I hate to say it, but, that person is protected for tellin' a lie about me." One gets the sense she is no longer speaking specifically about diet supplements.

To close, she passes on a piece of advice she says her "daddy" gave her when she was a teenager: "Don't believe nothin' you read and half what you see."

Paula maintains that she dropped the weight by cutting carbs: "Everything in my kitchen that was white, I threw it out. Except my husband."





*Every participant in the Deen Family Lawn Olympics receives a red silicone Paula Deen spatula set, and also the image of Paula Deen's legging-clad rump stretching up to kiss the sun, burned into his or her brain forever.*

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When I talk to my fellow cruisers about the lawsuit and ensuing controversy, I witness a bizarre phenomenon. Everyone knows that Paula used the slur About 25 Years Ago but no one I speak to manages to successfully compute the year that occurred About 25 Years before this one. People frequently express the sentiment that "things" were different About 25 Years Ago, in the 1960s. One man confidently states that Paula used the slur in the '40s, which would have made the n-word one of the very precocious baby Paula's first words; she was born in 1947.

In fact, Paula admitted in her deposition to having used the word to describe a black man who robbed the bank where she worked in 1987.

As with much of the media coverage of Paula's fall from grace, cruisers in our group focus single-mindedly on her use of a racial slur, rather than her (quickly abandoned) idea for an elegant antebellum-style wedding staffed exclusively by black attendants.

"Have you ever... used a derogatory term?" one woman asks me at dinner. "Not toward a gay or a black or a Jewish person or a person that was handicapped or anything?"

I tell her, honestly, that I don't recall ever doing so. Perversely, I feel bad that I can't give her the answer she wants, because I like her.

A man at the table, who is traveling alone, argues with me about the alleged offensiveness of the N-word.

"They use that word to each other," he says, meaning black people. "It's in their music."

I suggest to him that there is a difference between a black person saying it to another black person and a white person saying it to a black person, comparing the circumstances (admittedly, not very convincingly) to the difference between telling a self-deprecating joke about oneself and being subject to mockery from others.

"Don't you think that's a double standard?" he asks.

Sure.

"And you're OK with that," he says. (It's not a question.)

This man is one of the very few first-time Deen cruisers who admits to booking the trip as a show of support for Paula; when asked directly, most people suggest they just felt like booking their very first Paula Deen cruise this year out of the blue, for no reason. The gentleman at my table rattles off a list of companies he stopped supporting when they ceased their partnerships with Deen.

"I closed my Target charge card. I closed my Sears charge card. I have not been in a Walmart in over a year. I will never support those bastards. I will not support those people because what they did to her is wrong. Absolutely wrong... I had a gift certificate for Smithfield Hams [and] I gave it to a food bank."

Then he gives me useful tips about the best times to book flights online in order to snag low-priced airfare. When he gets up to revisit the buffet, he brings back two desserts, one for himself and one for me.

Another woman tells me that her white granddaughter gets called "cracker" in her majority-black Southern kindergarten class; it's like hearing an email forward read aloud. I'm not sure what the point is of this anecdote (which, given the age of the children, I find dubious) unless it is to make the case that these five-year-olds should have their multimillion dollar endorsement deals with Smithfield Hams revoked. After sharing her story, the woman raises her eyebrows and sits back in her chair. She rests her case.

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I hear the slur pronounced aloud five times on the cruise: twice by members of our group, three times by other passengers with whom I am discussing Paula Deen. It is only ever used in the context of a discussion of either the word itself, or of Paula's deposition.

Here are the places where I hear people say the word "nigger" while on vacation:

- in the sea
- in a hot tub
- at pajama brunch
- in a bar near the casino
- in the ice chamber of a sauna

The day we dock in St. Thomas, I call my father, who is around Paula's age, to give him an update on the cruise. I've never asked him what he thinks about the public response to her deposition, although he is without a doubt the black person I know best. So I ask.

"I think it was way overblown," he says from our snow-covered home in Pennsylvania. "People were sayin' all kinds of stuff in the '60s. If she said it now, that would be a problem."

"It wasn't the '60s!" I yell into the phone while lying on the beach. "It was the late '80s! It was right before I was born. She basically did say it now."

"Well, even in the '80s, people were racist."

I ask my dad if he forgives Paula, and he says he does. I ask if he thought she needed his forgiveness, and he says, "Yes, because she did say it." I ask if he would go on the Paula Deen cruise himself. He says sure. I ask if he would pay extra to go (the surcharge to travel as part of Deen's group was about \$700). He says no, but he would love to go for free.



I board the ship expecting racism. I find death and despair (and friends).

In terms of how much I personally enjoy myself, the cruise alternates between excruciating and fantastic. It is emotionally exhausting. No exchange exemplifies this more clearly than a moment at the final farewell party, when a woman with whom I have grown particularly close breaks down in tears as she lays out her hopes and dreams for my life, all of which are beautiful, and so, so nice, and I love you, Martha. It is never, ever relaxing.

Early on in the odyssey, I meet a spitfire grandmother born in one Carolina and raised in the other. Having become, in the autumn of her life, a seasoned world traveler, she is on the Deen cruise with a friend from her golf community. When asked what sort of life she led that affords her the luxury of spending her retirement on perpetual vacation, she responds, "I had a husband. And he died."

We are at the Welcome Aboard Cocktail Party (open bar). I offer my condolences. She says, "Well, he deserved to die."

The Welcome Aboard Cocktail Party (open bar) is the first of 12 free events organized by Paula's people. My father's daughter, I attend or participate in every one of these (and none of the optional paid excursions). In toto, this list consists of: the Welcome Aboard Cocktail party (open bar), Paula Deen's Cooking Demo, Photos with Paula and Michael, The Newlywed Game with Paula and Michael—"Hilarious," boasts the schedule—Bobby Deen's Book Signing, Group Buffet Dinner, Paula's Pajama Brunch, Deen Team Lawn Olympics, Paula's Signing Session, Michael's BBQ Demo, Charity Event with Paula Deen, and one more Cocktail Party and BBQ

(open bar). I observe but do not participate in Sunday's Slot Tournament with Paula and Aunt Peggy (for which there is an entrance fee), where I watch wave after wave of senior citizens, including Paula and her 84-year-old aunt, slap at computer touch screens to pop digital balloons for five straight minutes with such fervor that I am certain someone (possibly me) is going to have a heart attack. The grand prize is \$216.

Some of the women in our group are divorcees, but many are widows; by the end of the first night, I realize it is safe to just assume that every woman I meet is taking the trip to help cope with the death of the love of her life.

Most evenings I eat dinner in the ship's main dining room, Opus, the white and crystal design scheme of which can best be described as Liberace's spaceship. Although Opus features assigned seating, members of the Deen group are, to a certain extent, permitted to mix tables.

Here is a partial list of food items I consume while on the boat:

7 hot dogs with mustard and onions, 5 orders of french fries, 1 plate of escargot, 3 very hot French onion soups, 3 tomato bisques, 3 crème brûlées, 1 plate of spaghetti bolognese, sundry red pepper flakes, 1 cherry trifle, half of a dulce de leche, 1 bite of cheesecake, 1 slice of cheesecake, innumerable bread rolls with butter, 6 crunchy bread sticks dipped in hummus, 1 plate of western-style scrambled eggs, half a piece of white toast, 30 grapes, 5 handfuls of bacon, 3 bagels with cream cheese, lox, and capers, 2 orders of fried chicken, several unsatisfying cookies (I never gave up on finding a great one!), 2 donuts, 1 taco, 1 piece of chicken in sour cream and mushroom sauce, 3 mini mango cheesecakes, 5 mini fruit tarts, 1 vanilla frozen yogurt with chocolate sprinkles, 1 order of frog legs, 1 beef tournedo, 1 bratwurst with sauerkraut and mustard, half a slice of pepperoni pizza, 1 baked Alaska, 1 chilled pear and honey soup with mascarpone cream, 1 plate of Oysters Rockefeller, 1 prosciutto and arugula salad, 2 half lobster tails, 2 shrimp skewers, 1 plate of sauteed shrimp and scallops, 1 plate of mussels on a bed of lobster risotto, lots of watermelon, half a slice of peanut butter pie, 1 cup of "Blueberry Delight", 1 warm banana, 1 non-warm banana, 8 very little cakes, 1 attempted cheeseburger that turned into a low carb hamburger after the cheese and top bun blew away in the wind on deck, 3 pools of unlabeled sauce-based Indian foods, a bowl of creme anglaise that may have been intended to garnish some other dessert (unclear; served it to myself at a buffet), 1 fruit danish, 1 piece of cheddar cheese, 4 eggs benedict, 1 handful of cocktail shrimp, 2 hash browns, 1 blintz, 1 small plate of chips and guacamole, 4 portions of brie, many unidentifiable hors d'oeuvres, 14 pieces of chocolate (2 per night left on my pillow), 1 grilled tomato, 4 chocolate croissants.

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On the first formal night, one of the women at our table starts a rumor that another woman in our group is on meth. In the rumormonger's defense, if anyone on the cruise is on meth, it is this woman. In constant motion, even when standing still, she attends most events in head to toe body glitter, which, she explains to me, she made herself using DIY ingredients ("glitter" and "spray") and actually the glitter was purple when she bought it but her pajamas turned it green so now it's green. (It doesn't make any sense when she says it either). She dresses like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (all of it at once).

The first night on the boat, she earns the ire of Paula's bodyguard Hollis when the hug that accompanies her enthusiastic and spontaneous endorsement of Paula in the middle of Paula's welcome remarks ("No matter what anybody says about you, you are the bomb!") goes on a few beats too long. The night we invite her to join us at our table, she orders and ultimately forgets to drink a large glass of red wine—probably because she spends no more than 4 minutes in a row seated in her chair (she visits other tables; she visits groups of harried Eastern European waiters; she visits parts of the ship unknown).

Her personality is as effervescent as hydrogen chloride gas bubbling through a pseudoephedrine solution inside a glass beaker, though, and I would take a ramble with her through the ship's morgue over dinner with the dour-faced meth police any day.



*An average day's light breakfast, eaten before breakfast.*

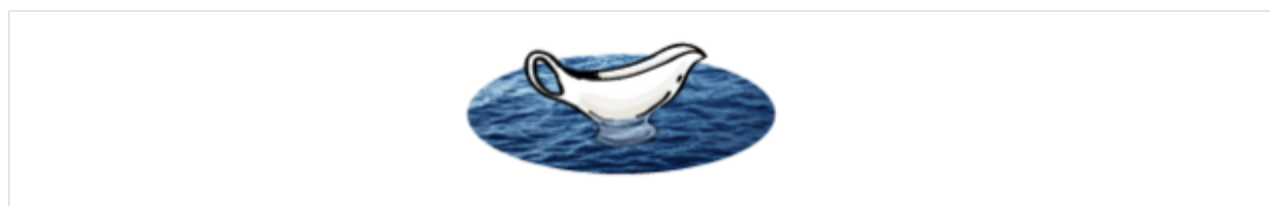
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Halfway through dinner one night, our table makes room for a latecomer: a wan, brown-haired woman on a motorized scooter, whom I recognize from the Q-and-A portion of Paula's cooking demo, where she soberly asked Paula if her cooking had ever made someone sick. (This, as it turns out, was the woman's way of saying, "I

would now like to share the story of the time my cooking made someone sick," which she then proceeded to do.) The first thing she says when she sits down—the very, very first thing; her foray into the group conversation—is: "I recently lost my best friend." Later in the meal, she reveals that her best friend was her husband.

Days later, when I have returned home to New York and am attempting to organize that portion of my handwritten notes on pages of free souvenir stationery, I will discover a crumpled scrap covered in observations about that evening's dinner, across the top of which I have scrawled one sentence:

"The world is terrifying & SAD."



Though Paula is a constant presence on the cruise, I have no real interactions with her. Her publicist smiles ruefully whenever the subject of an interview is raised, as if to say, *You know there is no way in hell I will ever allow that to happen, but it's darling that you tried*. Paula clearly knows who I am—I am the 24-year-old traveling alone who spends a lot of time causing her publicist to frown—but she seems determined never to acknowledge that I might be on the boat for any reason other than the fact I love Paula Deen cruises. Not everyone in the family sticks to the script: One day in the casino, one of the other reporters and I make polite conversation with Aunt Peggy as she sits at a slot machine. "Such young ladies shouldn't be on a cooking cruise," she says. "I bet I know [why you're here]." When we press her to explain, she smiles, "I'll keep it to myself," and looks away. Over the course of several days my most substantial interaction with Paula comes when I wear a polka dot headscarf, which, while stroking my hair, she tells me she likes. Otherwise we traffic in small exclamations: "Hi!" (*Hah*) she shouts with a wave as she walks by.

Even from a distance, though, she is very, immediately, likable. In real life, she walks and talks and looks and acts exactly like she does on television, only more like that. Her eyes, kohl-rimmed and framed by cartoonishly thick false eyelashes, are surely among the biggest, bluest eyes ever popped into the sockets of a human face. She exists in a state of perpetual delight, as if she is constantly being pleasantly surprised, and this delight is a contagion to those around her. Every once in a while her Georgia accent will drape itself so heavily over a word that that word is rendered utterly unrecognizable to other native speakers of American English. My notes are littered with baffled phonetic transcriptions: "Ailey...??"

She has either a shrewdly honed skill or an incredible natural gift for remembering names, faces, and one personal detail about every person she meets. If you are meeting for the first time, so she has not yet had the chance to acquire a personal detail to recount, she gives you a compliment or gently strokes your hair (or beard), as if to say: I see you have some hair, and I think that's great.

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Over the course of seven days, Paula will hear a joke about breasts being accidentally dipped in gravy and grits and repeat it several times, always to raucous laughter (her own).

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Time works differently on the Paula Deen cruise, partially because time works differently for Paula herself. For one thing, a timezone change effective Monday through Thursday leaves many people hopelessly unsure of what time it is at any point, even if they are staring directly at a clock hung over the pool bar ("Have these clocks been changed?"). The one hour spring forward is used to explain Paula's roughly 60 minute tardiness to Photos with Paula and Michael, though she could conceivably have been late just because she is late to everything, always. (She typically arrives 15 to 40 minutes tardy to every scheduled activity, leaving her team to play the part of Bad Cop Preventing Bustling Adorable Chatterbox from Gabbing with the Fans She Loves.) Her publicist tells me one day that Paula is always late not because she is spending time getting ready, but because she sits in her room chatting.

After spending a week in the presence of, but never really with, Paula—watching her tug on beards, toss a water balloon to her husband, and pull clip-in hair extensions out of her hair to brandish them, deadpan, before a crowd—I decide her house blend of aggressive folksiness is more of a put-on than she would like her cruise buddies to know, but less than a cynical mind would think. She's certainly naturally bawdy: Over the course of seven days, Paula will hear a joke about breasts being accidentally dipped in gravy and grits and repeat it several times, always to raucous laughter (her own). She will inject jokes about beating one's meat (to tenderize it) into multiple cooking demonstrations. She will refer to one female passenger as a "slot slut." She will engage in a very brief pantomime of doggy-style sex with her husband as he helps affix a microphone pack to the waistband of her capris. She will see her husband cooking a chicken, and ask, inexplicably, if he is choking his chicken.

One might describe Paula's husband, Michael, as the intersection between Walt Whitman and Santa. He is jolly and mischievous and the only human I've ever seen whose eyes actually twinkle. He looks like a children's book illustration of a tugboat captain—a job he still holds back home in Savannah—right down to his nautical arm tattoo. When Paula stands next to him, the difference between their coats is striking. The skin on Michael's face is a shiny dark red, as though he is perpetually in dire need of the Heimlich. Paula's, by contrast: a completely matte tan.

They get along incredibly, astonishingly, well—so much so that it is difficult to believe they haven't been married and in their sixties their entire lives. (In fact, the two wed just 10 years ago.) "You stuck," smiles Michael, pulling Paula in for an impromptu hug toward the end of the peanut butter pie portion of her 1:00 p.m. cooking demo. "And you stuck," Paula coos in reply. This is the cutest thing I have ever seen in my freaking life, which is why it is such a treat to watch them repeat it verbatim at the end of the 2:30 p.m. cooking demo.

Like many people comfortably settled into vast wealth, Paula looks somehow more expensive than everyone else. She favors leggings (which she calls "britches") and flattering tunic-style tops. Her silver hair is filled out with clip-in hair plugs, and then artfully arranged into an elegant pile of swoops and curls at the hands of her hairdresser, a quiet, cheerful man who travels with her aboard the ship. She wears more jewelry than a pirate skeleton guarding a treasure chest: an average day's accessories consists of three silver necklaces including one rosary, a pair of diamond pavé earrings, a glittering silver watch, two bangle bracelets, four rings, and stylish oversized eyeglasses.

The evening we pull out of St. Maarten, there is a charity auction featuring many items similar to these (including a set of Paula's actual hair extensions). Proceeds from the evening, we are informed numerous times before and during, will benefit Paula's Bag Lady Foundation, a vague 501(c) organization that vows to support "women and families in need." As of last July, the foundation had raised \$92,000 in contributions (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140319015839/http://www.philanthropyjournal.org/resources/special-reports/corporate-giving/paula-deen-debacle-slows-launch-new-bag-lady-foundation>), none of which has yet been charitably distributed. ("After everything over the summer, we postponed," sighs Paula's friend Bubbles, who serves as a director, one morning over breakfast.) When the Bag Lady Foundation applied for not-for-profit status in August 2012, it claimed to have \$71,000 on hand and projected that in 2013 it would spend \$34,000 on food banks and homeless shelters and \$46,000 on "staff/consulting fees." Its mailing address is a strip mall in Clarence, N.Y.

The night before the event is scheduled to take place, an advertised entry fee of \$60 is abruptly waived, causing group gossips to speculate that few tickets had been sold. Items sold include an orange sweater set from women's clothing retailer Chico's (Chico's size 3; standard size 16) (\$175), a soiled Tommy Bahama button down worn by Michael the day before (\$150), a makeover with Paula's hairstylist Jamie (\$400, sold to Bubbles), a baseball cap of Michael's (\$75, sold to Hollis), a single napkin (\$50), and sixteen billion other things.

Almost every item in the auction is bought by same small but vocal (and affluent) clique of Paula Deen superfans who, through their repeated Paula cruises (about 10 have gone on all eight cruises to date), fervent brand loyalty, and tax-deductible largesse, have achieved what might be deemed an approximation of friendship with Paula and her family. Paula does seem to have a fondness for these individuals—all are greeted and teased loudly and often—but there is no getting around the fact that people do not typically ask friends to purchase their husband's dirty shirts for \$175. Nor do friends typically earn cash on the side by working as professional lookalikes of their friends, as one woman—who successfully bids on several pairs of Paula's old shoes—does.

The auction is marred by two unbearable moments. The first occurs when Paula's husband is, in the spur of the moment and for no apparent reason, asked to remove the earring he has had for 30 years and donate it to the auction. Amateur auctioneer Bubbles starts the bidding for the earring, which is shaped like a boat shackle, at the arbitrary price of \$450. There are no takers, even after she declares that the metal alone is worth at least that much. There are also no takers when Bubbles drops the price to \$400, causing her to temporarily abandon the effort. (Later in the evening, the earring is put back on the auction block, and sells for \$225.)

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**The skin on Michael's face is a shiny dark red, as though he is perpetually in dire need of the Heimlich. Paula's, by contrast: a completely matte tan.**

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The other occurs when the most expensive item is put up for auction. It is a Fabergé watch, donated from one of the ship's luxury shops on consignment (meaning that, if it is sold, only a portion of the final sale price will go to the charity). Asking price: \$14,000. The watch is being offered as part of a package that includes a few other items, like a less expensive watch and a gift bag provided by Celebrity. In fact, it is not exactly clear what all is included in the package, because Bubbles is not much for detail.



No one bids \$14,000 for the watch and assorted other great things of indeterminate number and value. "Anybody?" asks Bubbles, looking slowly from face to face. "Anybody?" she repeats several beats later. "We know it's a lot to ask," she adds quietly, as the crowd stares at her, even more quietly.

Paula Deen, one of the room's most likely candidates for Person with \$14,000 to Spare, remains silent. No one bids on the watch.

Later, I finally get my interview, when I find myself alone with Paula Deen—well and truly alone, with no other human in sight—for the first and last time on the trip, after we surprise one another by rounding briskly into a long, narrow hallway from opposite connecting corridors at exactly the same moment. As Paula and I begin the trek toward one another, I wrack my brain to decide what devastating journalistic inquiry I will lob her way. Just before our paths cross at the midway point, I sputter out, "How are you feeling?" Without breaking her stride, she booms "Grite!" and flashes a beaming smile.

Paula is feeling great. Everyone is feeling great. Except the people who are seasick.



*A titanic friendship.*

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[Image by Jim Cooke, photos courtesy Caitly Weaver]

Highlights (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140319015839/http://gawker.com/gravy-boat-my-week-on-the-high-seas-with-paula-deen-an-1522108382>)

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