

The Miami Herald

SOUTH BEACH WINE & FOOD FESTIVAL

'Top Chef' judge is experienced in the experimental

Gail Simmons could use some warm weather.

"I'm not feeling too well," sniffs the *Top Chef* judge from her office at Food & Wine magazine. "February is not a very nice month in New York and the [South Beach Wine & Food Festival] is a perfect escape."

Simmons, 33, special projects manager for the mag, will host a Barilla interactive lunch with *Top Chef* winners **Ilan Hall** (season 2) and **Hung Huynh** (season 3) Sunday at the Biltmore.

Off-the-clock plans include visiting elegant restaurants like Michy's ("How could you not love that place?") as well as dives like Miami Beach's Puerto Sagua ("I have to get a Cuban or medianoche whenever I'm there.")

After five seasons with the 3-year-old Bravo hit, Simmons is certainly not afraid to experiment with food. Luckily, she's never been made physically ill by any of the contestants' creations.

"We all have tasted things we'd rather not have tasted," she says.

Talk about experimentation — she and new hubby **Jeremy Abrams** recently got back from their honeymoon in Vietnam.

"The food was out of this world. Simple yet extraordinary," she says. "One night we had shrimp cooked in a whole coconut that was set on fire on a bed of salt and some sort

of liquor. It blew my head off!"

Though Simmons cooks a lot "for a New Yorker" (two nights a week), this sizzler was a little tough to re-create in her kitchen.

"It had like 17 ingredients," she says, laughing. "There's no way I can conquer that."

Simmons is more likely to stick with roasting fish or making stews and soups, especially in the winter months. Abrams helps out — to a point.

"He's an excellent sous chef," she says, "but I take the lead. He knows it's my kitchen."

Simmons, who just wrapped filming of the Bravo hit in New Orleans, has a theory as to why *Top Chef* and other Food Network shows are so popular.

"Everyone has a connection to food — it's survival," she says. "Plus it's one of those industries like fashion where you get a behind-the-scenes look at not what many people get to see. All the fun — without the calories!"

— MADELEINE MARR

Info: The lunch is noon-2:30 p.m. Sunday, Country Club Ballroom at Biltmore, 1200 Anastasia Ave., Coral Gables; \$150. Tickets still available at www.sobwineandfoodfest.com.

SIMMONS



FEBRUARY, 2009