

The Food Festival Booker, Catering to Star Chefs



Alex Quesada for The New York Times

HE DRIVES. HE CODDLES. Lee Schragger inspects a festival site in Miami Beach in February.

ON a morning early this spring, Lee Brian Schragger phoned Kimberly Yorio, a publicist who works with chefs. Ms. Yorio had been trying to figure out how to promote a client’s book, and she used the occasion of the call to ask about the New York City Wine & Food Festival that Mr. Schragger was planning for October.

“Would you consider doing something with [Ferran Adrià](#)?” she recalls saying.

Mr. Schragger laughed. Mr. Adrià is the probably the most celebrated chef in the world. People fly to El Bulli in Spain from the other side of the planet. Who wouldn’t want him?

Ms. Yorio e-mailed Mr. Adrià’s representatives in Europe. The timing seemed right: Mr. Adrià’s latest book, “A Day at El Bulli,” is coming out in the fall.



HE'S THE MAN Lee Schrager with Rachael Ray.



Lee Schrager with Martha Stewart.



Lee Schrager with Jamie Oliver (center) and Alice Waters.



In October he will bring his Burger Bash to Dumbo.

“Would you consider doing something with [Ferran Adrià](#)?” she recalls saying.

Mr. Schrager laughed. Mr. Adrià is the probably the most celebrated chef in the world. People fly to El Bulli in Spain from the other side of the planet. Who wouldn't want him?

Ms. Yorio e-mailed Mr. Adrià's representatives in Europe. The timing seemed right: Mr. Adrià's latest book, “A Day at El Bulli,” is coming out in the fall.

The next day, she had his answer: “I don't like festivals. No.”

“Oh no,” she e-mailed back, “this isn't your normal festival. This is Lee's festival.”

Magic words. Mr. Adrià had appeared at a festival Mr. Schrager organized in South Beach in 2006. Mr. Schrager had welcomed Mr. Adrià to Miami like a visiting dignitary, making sure he had a good hotel room, giving a dinner in his honor and taking Mr. Adrià and his wife to Joe's Stone Crab and local Cuban restaurants.

“Great,” came the reply from Mr. Adrià. “Yes.”

No one else does or has ever done what Mr. Schrager does in the food world. As Bill Graham was to booking rock 'n' roll acts from the 1960s through the 1980s and Swifty Lazar was to closing Hollywood deals

during the studio era, Mr. Schrager, 49, is to wrangling celebrity chefs. They know him, they love him, they cross oceans for him.

What Mr. Schrager, who looks a bit like the actor [Paul Sorvino](#) and favors open-necked dress shirts, pressed slacks and loafers, asks from the chefs he has befriended is only that they show up at his festivals. As the charismatic director of the South Beach Wine & Food Festival, he has in seven years transformed what was originally a one-day wine tasting event on the campus of Florida International University for a few hundred people into a four-day extravaganza on the sand attracting tens of thousands of visitors, and, this year, a live broadcast on the “Today” show.

Further evidence of Mr. Schrager’s ability to leverage his relationships will be provided this fall, when he brings a version of the South Beach Festival to New York. The offerings, running from Oct. 9 through 12 and taking place all over the city, are set to include an all-you-can-eat burger bash with Rachael Ray under the Brooklyn Bridge; cooking demonstrations in the meatpacking district with Giada De Laurentiis, Tyler Florence, [Lidia Bastianich](#) and Masaharu Morimoto; a red meat and red wine feast at Craftsteak; talks at the Times Center (The New York Times is a sponsor of the festival) by Nigella Lawson, [Gordon Ramsay](#), [Alice Waters](#) and Mr. Adrià; and a dinner at Adour with [Alain Ducasse](#) as host. (Tickets for the events go on sale June 16.)

Ms. Yorio, who has known Mr. Schrager for nearly a decade, has seen him conjure spectacular events from thin air. “Lee is a guy who, if he says he is going to start the world spinning the other way, I have no doubt he would find a way,” she said.

His official job title is director of media and special events for Southern Wine & Spirits of America, a multi-billion-dollar company that is the nation’s largest distributor of alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages. The festivals serve both to expose brands distributed by his employer — like Absolut, Perrier-Jouët, Mouton Rothschild and thousands of others — and to raise money for several charities.

Mr. Schrager's dealings aren't about money exactly. What he offers to brand-name chefs is a combination of public exposure in the right ways at the right times, a brotherly kind of personal and career guidance and lots of coddling.

"Anything I am involved with in my life," said Ms. Ray, "he always wants to help with and be a part of, like Yum-o, my charity. He figures out how can he help with what he does to pay me back for my support."

Mr. Schrager's attentiveness extends to gifts, like the custom-blended gelato he ordered for Ms. Ray from ecreamery.com. He chose her favorite flavors — pistachios and dark chocolate bits in a coffee base — and named the [ice cream](#) "Izzy's Pick," after her dog.

"That's why everybody loves Lee so much," she said. "He's a giver, not just a taker."

In February, a few days before the start of the festival in South Beach, he sat at a conference table with the management of the Loews Miami Beach Hotel and went over the accommodations for the talent.

"Paula Deen," Mr. Schrager said to the general manager, Shawn Hauver. "Please tell me she has a balcony."

"She has a beautiful suite with a balcony," Mr. Hauver responded.

"And her security is in the room next to her?"

"Yes."

"Last year she said, 'I love the festival. As long as I can have a balcony where I can smoke next year, I'll come back.' "

A Loews staff person continued down the list, confirming arrangements for chefs like Jamie Oliver and [Bobby Flay](#) — who needed a rollaway, who needed two double beds rather than a king?

Mr. Schrager stopped at another name: “Alice Waters, what type of room do we have her in?”

“A rotunda room,” Mr. Hauver said.

“Great,” said Mr. Schrager, relieved that Ms. Waters, the queen mother of locavores, would be housed in one of the hotel’s airiest rooms.

What Mr. Schrager gives to celebrity chefs is not just the adulation of ready audiences, but the sense that he listens to their ideas.

[Emeril Lagasse](#) said he had encouraged Mr. Schrager to add cooking demonstrations for children to the festival in South Beach. “I said, ‘Lee, you need to bring in the kid element. Show ’em some good food, how to eat, how to cook.’ We tried it, and it’s here now, working out great.”

Mr. Schrager grew up in Massapequa, N.Y., graduated from the [Culinary Institute of America](#), and in the 1980s went to work for the prominent New York caterer Glorious Food. He was a chef at parties for Halston and benefits for the [American Ballet Theater](#) chaired by [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis](#).

His career as a master event planner blossomed when he opened Torpedo, a gay bar in South Beach in 1987. He gave the people what they wanted, and more. When he screened “Grey Gardens,” a documentary about a faded mansion in the Hamptons and its eccentric inhabitants, one of those inhabitants, Edith Beale, known as Little Edie, was on hand to play piano.

“She opened with ‘My Heart Belongs to Daddy,’ ” Mr. Schrager said, smiling.

These days he and his partner, Ricardo Restrepo, a pediatric radiologist, jet among their homes in Miami; Asheville, N.C., and New York, dining with friends like Billy and Katie Lee Joel and [David Bowie](#) and Iman.

“The thing that’s amazing about Lee is you can’t distinguish what’s his hobby and what’s his job,” said Christina Grdovic, publisher of Food & Wine. “It’s all a big blur.”

Although Ms. Grdovic's magazine has its own festival in Aspen, Colo., Food & Wine approached Mr. Schrager with an offer to sponsor South Beach in 2002. "He had put together a great list of talent," Ms. Grdovic said.

In 2007, the Food Network agreed to become a sponsor, too.

"He gave me all the reasons," said Brooke Bailey Johnson, president of the network. "We will give you receptions. You can introduce new talent. We'll take them even though they're not well known enough."

It works. A glimpse at the chain of e-mail messages that led Ms. De Laurentiis to accept his invitation to appear at the New York festival and at next year's South Beach festival shows what happens on one of the food world's most heavily used BlackBerries.

"Hi Giada," Mr. Schrager wrote May 7, and went on to explain that he was putting together a "brunch/lunch" for 100 people, sponsored by Tiffany. The meal would feature Dolce, a Napa Valley wine distributed by Southern Wine & Spirits. "Its an uber premium, super chic new event, that is calling out for a gorgeous, chic hostess, like you," he wrote.

"Tiffany's will buy your newest book for each of the 100 guests and also present you with a very special gift, along the lines of a watch — I noted your Rose Gold Rolex is your casual day watch. I'm sure you're familiar with Dolce, from Far Niente — it's also known as liquid gold to us beverage industry folks!" On May 13, Ms. De Laurentiis's assistant wrote back to accept the invitations both to New York and to the Tiffany lunch.

Mr. Schrager read the response in the back of a black S.U.V. while being ferried around Manhattan between meetings. "Giada's confirmed!" he announced to the others in the car.

Southern Wine & Spirits is a privately held, family-owned business run by Wayne E. Chaplin and his father, Harvey R. Chaplin. They did not know exactly what they were getting when they hired Mr. Schrager in 2000 after a stint as director of catering services at Intercontinental Hotels.

Southern assigned him the task of improving the wine tasting event they had started to benefit Florida International University's School of Hospitality and Tourism Management in Miami. In 1999, its first year, the event had attracted 600 people and raised about \$30,000.

Mr. Schragger moved it to the beach in 2001, changed the name, and convinced his friend Jeffrey Chodorow to convince Mr. Ducasse to appear. Once Mr. Ducasse committed, Mr. Schragger used his presence to lure two Bay Area chefs, Gary Danko and Cindy Pawlcyn.

This year, there were more than 50,000 attendees in South Beach and \$2.1 million went to the school, Mr. Schragger said.

"No one in their wildest dreams could have imagined how successful it's been," said the younger Mr. Chaplin, the chief operating officer of Southern Wine & Spirits.

Mr. Schragger said he does not take profits from the festivals. He receives his salary from Southern, and an expense account. Proceeds from the New York festival will benefit two hunger charities, the Food Bank for New York City and Share Our Strength.

His bosses are happy and the chefs are happy, which makes Mr. Schragger happy because it allows him to continue doing what he does.

Last month, while surveying an old brick-walled tobacco factory on the waterfront in Dumbo where the Burger Bash will be held, Mr. Schragger conjured a motivational vision for the people who would put in the sweat of arranging the event.

"It will be an Indian summer night," he told consultants and event planners.

New Yorkers know that October can bring freezing rain, but no one protested. He continued: "We'll have spotlights on the Brooklyn Bridge. Guests will be greeted at the gate with a Blue Moon beer." Blue Moon is not

distributed by Southern but is paying “six figures” to be featured, Mr. Schragger said.

Then he pointed up at the archways in the building’s walls, small versions of the arches that at the Colosseum in ancient Rome might have held pennants with images of Roman conquerors.

“We could put images of the chefs up there,” he said. “Wouldn’t that be great?”