Q-and-A: Food Network's "Chopped" Judge Maneet Chauhan

The celebrity chef is in town for this weekend's Newport Mansions Wine & Food Festival, where she will meets guests and serve signature dishes.

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The Newport Mansions Wine and Food Festival takes place Sept. 18-20 at Rosecliff, and includes wine seminars, multi-course high-end dinners and lively brunches in addition to the tented tasting experience that was the main highlight in previous years. There are only a few tickets left for the annual Vintner Dinner, a chef collaboration hosted by Food Network celebrity chef and "Chopped" judge Maneet Chauhan, and featuring Chef Kev D, the Newport Mansions Wine and Food Festival Culinary Director who was an NBC "Celebrity Cooking Showdown" winner and has appeared on "Beat Bobby Flay," "Great Food Truck Race" and the "Today" show; Chef Adam Greenberg of Sparrow Restaurant in New Milford, Conn., a four-time "Chopped" champion and guest on Food Network's "Tournament of Champions" and "Guy's Grocery Games"; and Chef Adam Young of Connecticut's Sift Bake Shop, Mix, ATY Bar & Bonbons, named Best Baker in America by the Food Network. "The Rhode Show" co-host Will Gilbert will emcee the dinner. I had the chance to interview Maneet ahead of the event:

Jamie: I'd like to inform more of our readers about your background in cooking and food. So would you share with me how you first got into cooking, including your upbringing and culture, and where you've taken it to today?

Maneet: I grew up in a really small town in India. My dad was an engineer. My mom was the principal of a school. The interesting part about India is that each and every state, and each and every region, has a regional cuisine of its own. So based on where you're from, that's the cooking that you do. But we grew up in

a community where there were people from all over India because of my dad's job. So I was the kid who would finish dinner at home and go over to my neighbors' houses, and tell them that I hadn't been fed. "So can I eat with you?"

It opened my eyes to such wonderful flavors and techniques, which even at that young age, I really appreciated. To me, it was learning why does their food taste different from ours?

Jamie: That's so cool.

Maneet: And as I started getting older, my parents were invited to other people's houses for dinners. They would call up my parents, and say, "Come around at 7 o'clock, but Maneet, send her around at two or three so she can help us cook." That's literally how it started. And then I did my undergrad in hotel management in India, because at that time, there weren't culinary schools per se, so you had to go through the hotel management rigmarole. In hindsight, now being a restaurant owner, I'm so grateful for that. In my final year in undergrad, I asked my chef instructor, "what is the best culinary institute in the world?," and without even batting an eyelid, he said, "The CIA, the Culinary Institute." And that was it. I came here, went to school, graduated, and put one step in front of the other.

Jamie: Then you spent time at many different restaurants throughout the United States, including in Chicago and Nashville. And how did the Food Network get connected to you for your first role in television?

Maneet: It was really interesting in the sense that when you become a chef, you no longer are just cooking; you're also promoting events. So when I was in Chicago, if there was something special going on, I used to go on the morning news to tell viewers what's happening. And when I started working in New York, our PR company got this opportunity of "Iron Chef." When I was at the CIA , I knew about "Iron Chef," the original, and we were like, "Oh my god, this is incredible! I want to do this."

When I got the opportunity, I was like yes, no question about it. It was again very organic in the sense that I went and competed. They liked what they saw, so they went ahead and invited me to be on the next season of the next "Iron Chef," and then they invited me to be a guest judge on "Chopped." And the next season, they invited me to be a permanent judge on "Chopped." It's been one step in front of the other, and you keep on moving.

Jamie: That's so cool. It's like one opportunity opens so many doors for you. I think that's good advice for anyone starting out is to say yes early on, and you never know what it could lead to.

Maneet: I think the biggest thing that I would say, whenever kids ask me, "How do we get on TV?" I say, "First, be very good at what you are, and then TV will come after you." Never the other way around.

Jamie: I know you have a cookbook out. Is it just one or do you have more than one?

Maneet: I have two cookbooks. The latest one, which has come out, is called *Chaat*, which is on street foods of India. I think that's what makes it so incredible and fun. And then the first book was *Flavors of My World*. And then I'm in the process of writing my next cookbook, so I'm really excited about that.

Jamie: I imagine you travel a lot now in your stature as a celebrity chef. So at the Wine & Food Festival, did they tell you what you can expect when all of the guests come to the Vintners Dinner? Can they expect to meet you?

Maneet: Oh yes, absolutely. Chef Kevin D [Des Chenes], who I have done a lot of events with, reached out. He's like, "Is this something that you would be interested in?" I said, "If I've got dates, they are yours," and I did have dates, so I'm really, really excited about it. Usually, when I do dinners of this sort, my favorite part is meeting the people. Because usually when you are in the kitchen, you are so isolated, right? Like it's you and the food, and then you keep on forgetting the people that you're cooking the food for. So, that's the one thing I am most excited about.

I am going to be serving the entree course, and working with all the incredible chefs. Kevin asked, "How involved would you like to be?" I'm like, "Totally." The next day is more station based. I will be handing out each and every plate to each and every person who comes up to the station, who are hopefully taking photographs, and having conversations. They do get the chance to meet and talk with you, which is nice.

Jamie: What kind of a dish are you going to cook for the one where you have a station?

Maneet: I'm going to do a tandoori lamb chop with a mango mint chutney and a red cabbage pomegranate slaw.

Jamie: That sounds incredible. Then you're going to be there for the previous night on Friday, the Vintners Dinner.

Maneet: So for that, I am making a braised short rib vindaloo. And that's going to be served on a saffron corn grits.

Jamie: That sounds incredible. I can't wait to experience it. Is every chef for that dinner cooking a different course?

Maneet: That's how it works for the Vintners Dinner. In the kitchen, each and every chef's course is going out. All of us, we just jump in and work together, which to me I think is my favorite part. You get to know each other.

Jamie: I know you are a mom of two children, and as a mom of two children, I just wanted to know how do you balance your career? You have so many exciting opportunities, and I'm sure it is hard to balance it all. But how do you make it happen?

Maneet: First of all, I don't think that there is anything known as balance in life. The moment that I find myself in gets 200 percent of me. So if I'm with the kids, I'm with the kids. If I am at work, I am at work. Also, a lot of who I am is because I grew up seeing my parents work hard and achieve dreams for themselves and for us. And I'm hoping that's what the kids see, but also there are a lot of opportunities that I take on that I can take the kids with me. Like in October, I'm going to go to the Bahamas to do an event at Bahamar. The family comes along with me. I feel very fortunate that we can do that. There is a lot of homework which goes into it, right? Whenever I'm on flights, and I'm on so many flights, all I'm doing is homework, as in figuring out what the schedule is: Who's picking up the kids, who's dropping the kids? What are the special things happening? Our entire home kitchen is under construction because we're making a new home kitchen. So literally every time I've been in town, like this morning, I've been cooking with a vengeance and freezing everything so that they have food. You do what you have to do, right? I think that's the part about being a mom.

Jamie: You have to take the opportunity when it comes, and you know you can be good at one thing at one point, and then when you come back to your role as mom, you can pick it up right where you left off. I live that way too.