

Brown Alumni Magazine

A NEW PRESIDENT Welcomes a New Class
Penn State Football Coach BILL O'BRIEN '92

Brown

September/October 2012 \$6.00 Alumni Magazine

DANA COWIN '82 has turned *Food & Wine* into a must-read for all foodies, from wannabes to top chefs.

FIRST LADY of FOOD

www.brownalumnimagazine.com

The cover features a photograph of Dana Cowin, a woman with short dark hair, smiling in a kitchen. She is wearing a dark top and a colorful necklace. In the foreground, there is a tray of chocolate cookies and some cookie cutters on a wooden surface. The background shows kitchen shelves with various items and hanging pots.

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2012

Brown Alumni Magazine



22 BROWN ALUMNI MAGAZINE

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2012

First Lady Of Food

Over the past two decades, *Food & Wine* editor-in-chief **DANA COWIN '82** has taken a slumping magazine and **turned it into a leading brand.** But what she's really been trying to do is **expand your happy world.**

BY BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL '01

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DUSTIN FENSTERMACHER

SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2012 23

I'm having lunch with Dana Cowin.

Foodies everywhere would kill to be able to say that. As editor-in-chief of *Food & Wine* magazine, Cowin '82 is one of the country's most influential gourmands. Over the past seventeen years she has made *Food & Wine* the top food magazine in the United States, steadily growing its circulation and expanding its influence. It hasn't been easy.

When Cowin took the reins at *Food & Wine* in 1995, the nation's current obsession with food and chefs was in its infancy. The Food Network had launched only two years before. *Iron Chef*, *Top Chef*, and other reality cooking shows wouldn't appear for another decade or more. And *Food & Wine*, founded in 1978, was "the third book in a two-book category dominated by *Bon Appetit* and *Gourmet*," says Ed Kelly, CEO of American Express Publishing, which publishes *Food & Wine*. "Now, within that group, one is gone, and the other is a struggling also-ran. The tables have flipped upside down under Dana's leadership." As a result of *Food & Wine*'s success, Cowin earlier this year received one of the food industry's most coveted honors when she was inducted into the James Beard Foundation's Who's Who of Food & Beverage in America, taking her place alongside Mario Batali,

Martha Stewart, Madhur Jaffrey, and Tim and Nina Zagat.

Through it all, Cowin has maintained a sort of star-struck naiveté. It's as if she's a schoolgirl dropped into a room full of movie stars; she can't get over how lucky she is. When two of New York's top sommeliers walked in during our lunch at ABC Kitchen (which is just north of Manhattan's Union Square), she burst out, "Ooooo!" and waved enthusiastically. "Robert Bohr!" she said. "Love him!" Cowin doesn't write about food very often, she says, "because it's really hard. The people who are good at it, I worship at their feet. And there are not many of them."

With that in mind, here goes: Lunch begins with kale salad. It comes out alongside three slices of crusty bread in a rough-hewn wood bowl and a plate of fiddlehead ferns, compliments of the chef. The kale is lemony and tart, with a spicy kick, and the fiddleheads, available only a few weeks each year, taste like garlic and earth. "This place is alarmingly good," Cowin says.

Part of the high-end decorating store ABC Carpet & Home, the restaurant's décor is a mash-up of rustic and modern, as if someone had crossed a barn with an abandoned warehouse furnished by Mies van der Rohe. The feel of the place reflects its farm-to-table New American menu, and this synergy of design with food and drink is what makes *Food & Wine* tick. Because, despite its name, *Food & Wine* is not just about food and wine.

"The idea is to talk about life, but with food at the center," Cowin says. "There's this life that we talk about that we call the 'always hungry' life. They're always hungry," she says of her readers. "They always want more information. They're adventurous. They'll try new things; they'll travel for food. The central idea is that somebody would have food and wine at the center of their life, and everything else would revolve around that."

It would be easy to sell magazines by running five-minute microwave recipes or splashing pictures of Anthony Bourdain or other celebrity chefs on the cover. Cowin has chosen a different approach. *Food & Wine* contains plenty of recipes, of course, but Cowin has been masterly at giving readers instructions for food they can prepare while goading them to take their passion for food to the next level. She likes to see *Food & Wine* as the place where everyone from a small-town mom with an adventurous cooking streak to a Michelin-starred chef can turn to find out what's new—to be surprised.

"We hope it's not intimidating," she says. "I really don't believe that everything should be a thirty-minute meal. And I don't believe that everything should be supermarket ingredients. One thing that has led to the magazine's success is a balance between the aspirational and the practical. In every issue, we're really, really conscious of delivering both."

With a median household income of \$160,000, many readers of *Food & Wine* can afford to be aspirational in ways the rest of us cannot. For us, the magazine is a masochistically delicious cascade of beautiful meals you'll never eat at restaurants you can't afford in destinations you can only dream of visiting;

Brown Alumni Magazine



COWIN'S INTEREST IN WINE has grown along with that of her readers. "We are the magazine for the wine enthusiast who just wants to understand it better," she says.

Tangier, Uruguay, Alsace, and Lyon. And yet, alongside every dish is a recipe, ranging from simple (mozzarella with summer squash and olive puree) to elaborate (baked seafood dumplings with saffron sauce and Swiss chard). Can't afford a trip to Napa Valley's hot new restaurant Oenotri to try their Pizza with Garlic Cream and Nettles? Make it yourself.

Food & Wine features such articles as "the Costco Challenge," in which a celebrity chef is set loose in the warehouse store, and "Wine Lover's Guide to Party Planning," which suggests "the best buys in wine, food and style" at Target, Trader Joe's, and Whole Foods. "I'm really interested in what people actually do," Cowin says. "They actually go to Costco and Target." The flip side of that is inspiration. "I want to inspire people to do things that they maybe wouldn't have thought of doing."

As soon as our lunch arrives, Cowin spoons bites of her chicken salad onto my plate. When I protest, she insists that "in the food world, you share. If you don't share, you're weird." The salad is tossed in a light vinaigrette, slightly sweet with a hint of heat. In the salad are whole tiny carrots, battered and fried. Those carrots—crisp on the outside, sweet and soft on the inside—are one of the highlights of the meal.

In return, I tell her to help herself to bites of my tuna burger and fries—"I'm going to," she says. "I wouldn't actually give that a second thought"—and she does, reaching over throughout our conversation to dip the golden fries dusted with fresh rosemary into the aioli on my plate. We talk about how delicious the food

is, but we don't dwell on it. Dissecting in too much detail why a meal is special or satisfying, Cowin says, can ruin it.

"The key to being a good food writer is actually being a good fiction writer," she says. "If you can write fiction—draw a scene, make characters, come up with metaphors, tell a story that goes from beginning to middle to end—that's your best qualification. Every dish is a narrative. Every meal is a narrative. Every restaurant is a narrative. Every dinner party is a narrative. Without the narrative, it's just a bunch of ingredients put together."

Later that afternoon Cowin walks into a spotless, beautifully appointed kitchen ten stories above Times Square, where Justin Chapple is de-veining shrimp. Chapple, a lanky blonde with striking blue eyes, is one of the magazine's three full-time cooks, and the *Food & Wine* test kitchen has three of everything: Sub-Zero refrigerators, sinks, industrial ranges and ovens, butcher-block counter space. Chapple has just finished preparing a plate of tacos with fingerling potatoes, kale, and chorizo. "Have you had fun testing these recipes?" Cowin asks him.

"Oh my god," Chapple says. "So much fun. Everything is so different."

Each year Cowin edits several *Food & Wine* books, including cookbooks and a wine-and-cocktail guide. Chapple is testing recipes for a new annual cookbook that Cowin is calling the Discovery Series. This new book will showcase ten cooks,

Brown Alumni Magazine

each of whom will contribute ten recipes, with art shot by ten different photographers. Discovering new talent, Cowin says, is one of the most fun and most important parts of her job. The magazine does this all year, but once a year a special issue showcases ten Best New Chefs, a designation that can make careers and rescue faltering restaurants.

"One of her favorite days of the year is when she gets to call our Best New Chefs and tell them that they've been selected," says Cowin's deputy editor, Christine Quinlan. "Without fail, there's always somebody who thinks they've been punked, someone who's in tears, someone who's cursing in public."

Best New Chefs like David Chang or Thomas Keller are unknown when they are selected, but then "go on to do just incredible things," Cowin says. "I'm trying to think of a way to say this without sounding conceited, but we don't make a lot of mistakes when we pick talent. People come to rely on the magazine for finding new talent, and the new talent is so proud of having been found that they help promote the magazine."

As the Best New Chefs demonstrates, Cowin has transformed *Food & Wine* from a magazine into a brand. Each summer the chefs are fêted at the Food & Wine Classic, an extravagant, star-studded weekend in Aspen, Colorado. It is one of seventeen events that the magazine puts on each year—opportunities, Cowin says, to maintain a personal connection with readers and "bring the magazine to life in three dimensions." The *Food & Wine* brand now includes the print magazine, events, an active social media presence (including Cowin's own lively Twitter feed), books, iPad and other tablet versions of the magazine, and a content-packed, aesthetically engaging, and revenue-producing website. "The breadth of the brand," Cowin says, has helped solidify *Food & Wine*'s place.

Make no mistake: the magazine is still the brand's core. *Food & Wine* is always evolving, Cowin says. Interest in wine among the general public, for example, has increased dramatically over the last decade. In the past, readers serious about wine, she says, "had a geeky magazine which had point scores. But we are the magazine for the wine enthusiast who just wants to understand it better."

Cowin is one of those editors whose antennae are always up. "This ingredient I've seen at five other places!" Cowin told deputy editor Quinlan recently over a meal. "Maybe there's a story here!" Quinlan adds: "The wheels are always turning."

Food & Wine has in the past several years devoted a lot more space to mixed drinks, which have become an important trend in the food world. Until then, those who love the kooky names and great stories about cocktails but don't necessarily want to dissect every ingredient "didn't have a general interest magazine that was really for them," Cowin says. "If you love cocktails and food, then we become the magazine for you. All of these side groups have a home at *Food & Wine*. We see it all as part of a lifestyle."

"Dana is, in a world where that's becoming rarer and rarer, one of the most principled people I know," says Andrew Zimmern, host of the Travel Channel show *Bizarre Foods* and

a food celebrity in his own right. Zimmern said that where other magazines beg him to appear in their pages—"I'm not humble-bragging," he says. "I have a TV show. So I'm a recognizable face and name; it helps sell magazines"—it took Cowin three years to hit on a way to work with Zimmern that felt true to *Food & Wine*'s brand identity. "If you're trying to create an image for a magazine and what a magazine stands for, you need to have a really keen understanding of what the magazine is about," Zimmern says, "and it's really hard to stick to your guns."

Cowin's introduction to the magazine world came when her former Brown English professor, the late Roger Henkle, landed her an entry-level job at *Vogue*, where one of her tasks was to edit the magazine's monthly wine column. The text, she concedes with a laugh, was unreadable "before I got it, and after I got it. I was not Mrs. Added Value."

But the magazine introduced her to the "food lifestyle" idea, she says: "the place where food, design, entertaining, wine all intersected." The decorators and fashion designers that the magazine profiled all lived what Cowin describes as "pretty lives," and she was drawn to their beautiful houses and the elegant way they set a dinner table. To this day, Cowin says, "I love houses. I love design. I love the way people live. I love objects. I love artisans." And she loves entertaining. She and her husband, Reuters producer Barclay Palmer, and their two kids, Sylvie, 11, and William, 9, spend weekends in upstate New York, and they often invite friends to come along.

With short brown hair, a petite frame, and a preference for dress blazers in bright colors or bold prints, Cowin certainly doesn't look like someone who eats for a living. Born and raised on New York's Upper West Side—from the roof of her current apartment building she can see the one where she grew up—Cowin says she comes from "a total non-food household. My mother literally does not cook. I don't think she has ever cooked me a complete meal. She subsists on English muffins, chocolate bars, and going out. That's not even an insult to her. It's just a fact." When, during and after college, Cowin discovered that she liked entertaining, she taught herself some simple dishes in order to have friends over. "And," she adds, "maybe find a boyfriend."

But, Cowin says, "I don't pick up a pot or a pan during the week." If she isn't eating out for work—and, she says, she tries not to do so more than two nights a week so she can be home to put her kids to bed—dinner is usually something easy and fast, like yogurt. "But on a weekend, a Saturday, I will just spend all day standing at the stove, or chopping at the counter, or shopping or marketing." Her idea of a happy Saturday, she says, is going to a flea market and a farmers market. "I love shopping for food. Love it. If I do not go to a farmers market, I actually feel incomplete."

In the early days at *Food & Wine*, Cowin says, the work was simpler. There was no Pinterest or Tumblr or iPad edi-

Brown Alumni Magazine

tion. She edited a magazine. And yet, "I worked every single weekend, and I worked every night until 9 or 10 o'clock. When I think about that, it's comical. What could I have been doing?" She chuckles as she recalls it. "Part of it was, I was trying to reimagine something. But part of it"—she pauses, laughs some more—"I mean, I needed to get a life."

Now she grapples with a very different problem. In Aspen this summer, Cowin sat down for a two-and-a-half-minute interview with the website genConnect. How do you balance your career and kids? the host asked. How do you make time for yourself? "I have no time for myself," Cowin says. But "every minute that I'm doing my job, I love. And every minute I'm with my kids—" she pauses, considers. "Well, 99 percent of the time I love being with my kids. But that's my time, actually. I don't need the separate extra time. I'm not sure what that separate extra time would be. Because my days are filled with fun."

Although she's a tough critic with a strong point of view, Cowin often describes herself as "pathologically positive." Coworkers describe her as relentlessly upbeat and supportive. "Dana is incredibly loyal to her staff, and does everything she can to try to take care of them," says Quinlan. The magazine had never had a deputy editor before, she says, but Cowin, impressed by Quinlan, invented the position in order to promote her. "You don't have to ask for all of these things," says Quinlan. "When you work hard, it's recognized and rewarded."

Cowin first earned the pathologically positive descriptor in 2008, after she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She wrote about her experience in an essay in *O, The Oprah Magazine*. "After her diagnosis," the introduction read, "Dana Cowin saw three choices: (1) feel sorry for herself, (2) hole up alone, or (3) celebrate the things that matter most."

The essay, called "Is This Any Time for a Party?" described the series of "cancer parties" Cowin threw during the year that she has come to describe as "my year of breast cancer." One party had an if-life-gives-you-lemons-make-lemon-meringue-pie theme. "My friends would bring both savory and sweet pies," Cowin wrote: "Quiche, apple, chocolate pecan, and of course lemon meringue. And my mother would host. No way did I want to cook or clean up for a big group of people. I'd been feeling relatively well, but not that well."

Another party, timed to coincide with her double mastectomy, was a ladies-only Soul Sisters party, with a 1970s-style dress code, platters of soul food, and bottles of Strong Arms Shiraz. At another, Cowin made a toast that *Food & Wine* publisher Christina Grdovic says has stayed with her ever since. "I just want to tell everybody," Cowin said, raising her glass, "stop saying you can't find the time. To learn photography, or learn a new language, or go to the gym, or spend time with your kids. I definitely didn't think I had time to go to chemo every day for sixty days. But you know what? I found the time."

"It's weird to say," Cowin concedes now, "but I had a very good year." She reconnected with old friends, who cooked for her and accompanied her to chemotherapy. "Drip buddies," she called them. "My husband likes to remind me it was indeed

It's that moment of surprise—an idea exchanged over a meal that might change the world, the summer's first perfect ripe tomato—that makes Cowin say she has the world's best job.

stressful. And I was sick. But my immediate emotional reaction was sort of positive. And then you get all this positive reinforcement for having reacted positively to cancer. Then you feel really great about yourself!" Cowin knows how lucky she is: "I wouldn't want to fight the demon that is the sadness about illness, because that's really, really, really hard." But, for the most part, she says, "it just didn't come." Cowin has been cancer-free for more than four years now. After five, she will be considered, as she puts it, "done with that cancer."

Grdovic says that Cowin's reaction to her diagnosis is reflective of her approach to life in general: "If you can take something as horrible as cancer on with a positive attitude, imagine how great it is to take on things like food and wine and parties and entertaining, that are really fun to begin with."

At our ABC Kitchen lunch, we decide to share the salted caramel ice cream sundae for dessert. The subtle flavor of the ice cream, served in a sea of chocolate sauce, is set off by the crunchy, salty sweetness of the candied peanuts and caramel popcorn sprinkled on top. With the toppings so reminiscent of peanuts and cracker jack, I am surprised to discover that each mouthful tastes nostalgically, whimsically, exuberantly like the circus.

Ultimately, it's that moment of surprise—the discovery of some amazing piece of furniture at a flea market, an idea shared over a meal that might change the world, the summer's first perfect ripe tomato—that makes Cowin say that she has the world's best job. "I personally think that every day, if you've had an adventure in taste, your day is better for it," she says. "I hope we've helped people expand their happy world."

BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL is a contributing editor.