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Who's His Lady?

Richard Florida's sizzling sweetie -- and buddy Batali!

Shinan Govani, National Post

Published: Saturday, April 12, 2008

<http://www.nationalpost.com/sports/Story.html?id=440449>



Peter Redman, National Post

Rana Florida will not tolerate one more Torontonians asking her why she moved here of all places.

Florida-bound I was when I went south last week. By south, of course, I mean Wellington Street. By Florida, of course, I mean Richard Florida, the nifty specimen of a man who is a renowned urban theorist, broad-shouldered economist, cunning talk-show guest and, well, the kind of Homo sapiens once likened to TomCruise's motivational speaking character in Magnolia.

His demographic forecasts and broad shoulders were to be found on a Thursday night, up an ample-sized set of stairs, in a bright and airy loft that purportedly is the domain of a certain heiress of note. The occasion? An intimate dinner held to mark Florida's latest potboiler -- watch out, Jackie and Danielle! -- called Who's Your City? How the Creative Economy is Making Where You Live the Most Important Decision of Your Life.

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Greeting the stylish syndicate of about 40 -- oh, there's Victoria Jackman and Bruce Kuwabara; there goes Michael Budman and Diane Bald -- was, of course, Florida, in a creatively-classed open collar. By his side? Rana, his wife and secret weapon. Ever since being traded here in the fall, so to speak -- when the Q-rated academic arrived to run the new Prosperity Institute at the Rotman School of Management -- the inevitable sotto voce of New Power Couple has tugged at this pair. New blood always being in style and in demand, their Toronto reception has been akin, at least a little, to F. Scott Fitzgerald's Dick and Nicole Diver, the couple in *Tender is the Night* who, on sabbatical from America, wash up on the shores of the Riviera and become the toasts-of.

But enough about you, I suddenly found myself saying to Florida. Or, to be more exact: "OK, I know you're a distinguished academic and everything, but what I'm truly impressed by is that one of your best friends is Mario Batali!"

It's true! The corpulent, Crocsclad Food Network chef went to college with our star thinker, and they've been pals ever since. Yes, Richard confirmed to me now, Mario wore Crocs even back then. And, naturally, he also confirmed, he can get into Mario's top-rated Babbo in New York "any time" he wants.

"He gave me a plug for the book," Florida reminded, reinforcing at the same time the all-important theme of social networks found throughout his work! Indeed, looking up the Batali rave later, the plug goes something like this: "Who's Your City? is another breakthrough idea by urban life genius Richard Florida. If you are contemplating a move or know someone who is, or are even vaguely interested in the idea of place as self, this book is a must read."

In the book, itself-- which crawls with chapter-headings such as the "Rise of the Mega-Region," "The Mobile and the Rooted" and "Married with Children" -- there is a re-verse-plug for his chef friend.

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Or, at least, a mesmerizing insight. "As my college buddy Mario Batali once told me," writes Florida, "the best perk of being a celebrity chef was the ability to get his kids into private school. There were a surplus of investment bankers and financial types, but how many schools had the kids of a celebrity chef?"

But speaking of celebrity chefs, did I mention that dinner tonight was not c/o Mario, but by the news-making Susur Lee? Just days after the news broke that he was going to take a foray of his own into New York City and downsize his presence in Toronto, this lucky crowd got a private taste of his buzz and his eats. Oh, and how they ate it up! And by "they," I mean, Linda Frum and Seamus O'Regan and Rotman School dean Roger Martin (who Florida calls "the best dean in the world" in his book). Oh, and, of course, our hosts, Geoffrey Beattie, president of Thomson family holding company, Woodbridge, and his dishy wife, Sandie.

Interesting, wasn't it, that while this dinner was held to fete a new, bold Torontonian, that the dinner came via a certain bolting Torontonian. A case of "You win some, you lose some?" Maybe. Or, you might just say: It's the global economy, baby!

Oh, and one other thing: Rana, the wife and secret weapon, really is one of those pistols in a short skirt. Jordanian by way of Detroit, she's 8 Mile meets Queen Rania! And, at one point we shared quite a laugh when she ranted gorgeously about Toronto's famed inferiority complex.

"Get over it," she advised, free of charge. "If one more person asks us, why we moved here" -- making a face -- "I'm not sure what I'm going to do."

"OK," I replied. "Then instead I'll ask: What took you so long?"

MEANWHILE, I SEE, I HEAR:

-That Boys Don't Cry star Hilary Swank is back to a boyer-than-ever 'do. Just in time for her latest Os-car-baiting project, Amelia-- about famed aviatrix Amelia Earhart. It starts shooting in Toronto soon, soon, soon.

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AND ALSO:

-That building guru Mike Holmes has done wonders for the renoindustry --but he's also created a bit of a monster! The overalls-wearing HGTV Canada star and top Ellen DeGeneres man-crush tells 2 magazine, "I think the show has created awareness with homeowners, and I think it has given a great advantage to companies who care about their work. But I still receive 1,000 emails a week from people in trouble -- that's depressing."

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Who, what, when, where and why you may have missed last week:

-After their opening weekend series, the Blue Jays bought the Yankees a nice round of drinks at Manhattan's Rick's Cabaret -- an "upscale adult nightclub," natch. A dancer named Karen later offered this bit of play-by-play to the New York Daily News: "I love the Yankees, but the Toronto guys had a lot of class. Oh yeah, they were great tippers."

-MuchMusic VJ Leah Miller cried her "eyes out" when told she'd won the gig as the host of So You Think You Can Dance Canada.

- Peter Nygard seen out and about in Clubland, at Tryst on Peter Street.

-As the likes of Debbie Travis, Margaret Trudeau, Dini Petty and Pamela Wallin arrived at the Chatelaine 80th anniversary party at the Windsor Arms hotel, John Cusack stumbled into the lobby, according to several witnesses. Says one snitch, Cusack saw a reporter he recognized and asked her what the heck was up. When she told him, he said he was going to go somewhere for a drink until it was "all over."

- Keanu Reeves has disavowed plans for yet another sequel to Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure. "If there is, I'm not there," is what he told OK! magazine.

'I'm going to name my first heart attack after you!'

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Some of the love/hate couple-talk overheard recently at Bymark

'Do you know where the Sir magazine party for Dean and Dan is next week?'

An inquiring mind at the Four Seasons, heard trying to get the scoop on the upcoming DSquared bash

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