

# NOV



## Rocco's Back

... and he's got a beef with all his critics

BY LISA ARCELLA  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

**R**occo DiSpirito returns tonight in "The Restaurant." Since the hit reality show finished its run on NBC last summer, he's lost his partner, his girlfriend and the respect of his fellow celeb chefs. Now Mama is afraid she'll lose their house.

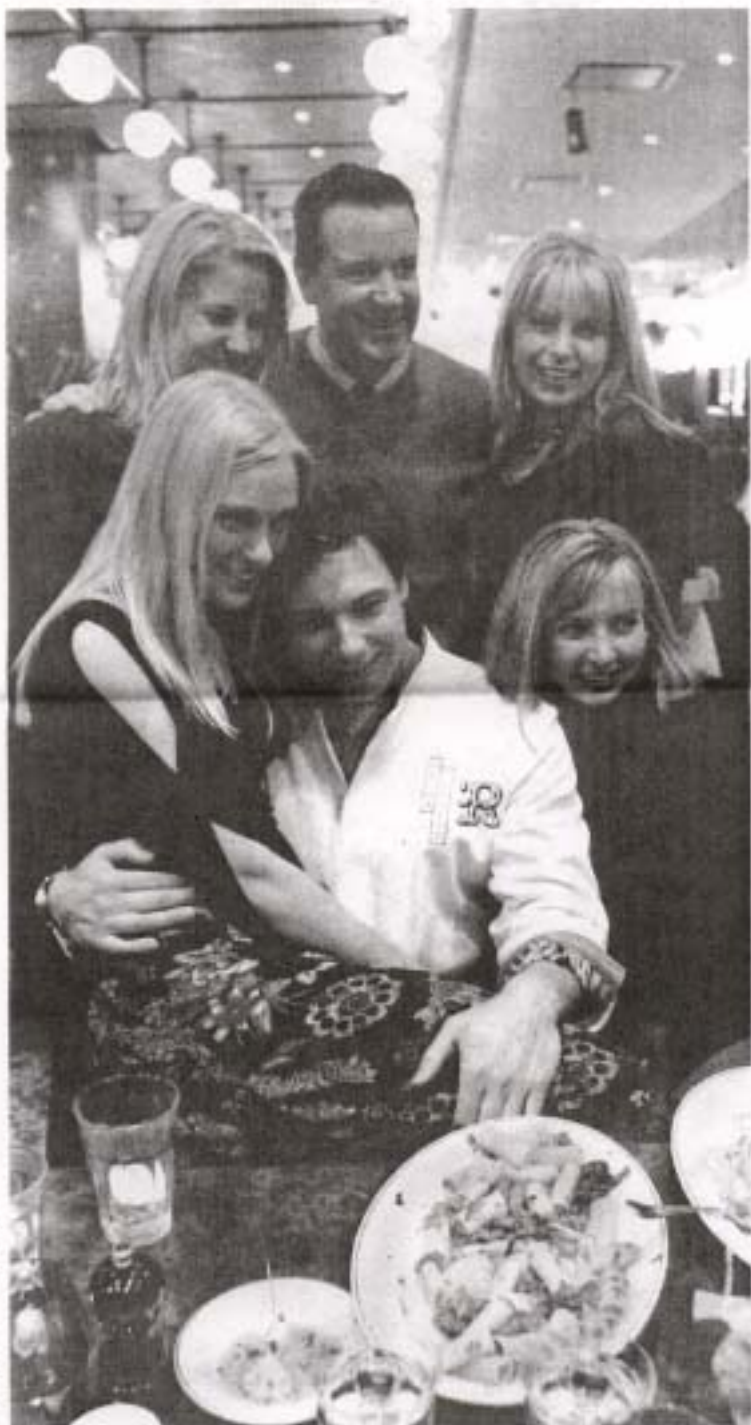
Ah, the sweet smell of success. DiSpirito, the "rock-star" chef and owner of Rocco's on 22nd, says all the attention has been more

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



### Fans try TV magic to save their 'Angel'

SEE TV



**SURROUNDED BY DISHES:** Rocco DiSpirito and friends live it up in the latest installment of "Restaurant"

# Second helping of Rocco

*Now on 'Restaurant' menu, a food fight over management*

#### CONTINUED FROM COVER

than even be bargained for.

But, he tells the Daily News, he's back on the air and fighting back against the critics who hurt him.

Take this analysis from Influx TV chef Mario Batali: "Bobby Flay has to love Rocco DiSpirito, because he is no longer the most despised chef in town."

"Look, that was mean," DiSpirito says.

"No one has been confrontational about it to my face, but I know some people have cooled to me since I started the show."

"It's kind of like what happened to Emeril [Lagasse] when he did a sitcom. He went through a period where people were not anxious to be associated with him."

**R**occo has become a brand name in the last year — with TV appearances, cookbooks, a product line and even another TV project in the works.

If that's treason in the food nation, he says, so be it. "Everyone in New York has this notion of a pure artist, willing to struggle for his art and his beliefs, but if you do that in the restaurant business you will quickly be out of business."

"Our job is to make others happy, not ourselves. It is all about the customer."

"No one is out there criticizing Bill Gates because he didn't remain a programmer, are they?"

But the legal battle for Rocco's, rather than his mama's, meatballs, is likely to be the focus of the new season.

**See David Bianculli review in TV.**

DiSpirito's partner, China Grill Management, wants control of the restaurant, it says, because the place has lost more than \$900,000 due to DiSpirito's poor management.

In his own courtroom, DiSpirito claims his investors are trying to destroy him — squeezing his dream so hard he has had to use frozen pasta instead of fresh.

And superstar reality TV producer Mark Burnett ("Survivor," "The Apprentice") was there to catch all of the angry confrontations between DiSpirito and moneyman Jeffrey Chodorow.

"Jeffrey showed up on the first day of shooting, after I hadn't seen him for six months, with a camera crew behind him and it progressed from there," DiSpirito says.

"It is costing me thousand and thousands of dollars



**A TENDER MOMENT:** Microphones pick up the chat between DiSpirito and bartender Heather Seel for his NBC reality show.

in legal fees, so it's certainly not a publicity stunt I can afford.

"The whole thing is bizarre world for me. My family and I are torn apart by this."

Especially upset is Rocco's 79-year-old mother and executive chef, Nicolina, the meatball queen.

"Mama thinks Jeffrey is going to take her house away and everything that our family has worked for," he says. "She is an old-school mama. Courts and lawyers scare the heck out of her."

And if that wasn't enough to give him a prime-time case of rage, he just split with his girlfriend, former beauty Yvonne Scio.

Reports say newly minted celeb Rocco, who made the *People* list of sexiest men in 2002, was hitting on beautiful models at every trendy nightclub in Manhattan.

"That is absolutely not true," he says.

"We still love each other very much and we are still friends, but we agreed it wasn't working and it has nothing to do with the show or that I am known now, either."

"I don't think that the show could have affected a very strong relationship."

**N**one of this madness will keep DiSpirito from the bright lights and cameras.

"It sounds like my life is a miserable, burning bush of hell," he jokes. "But it actually is very positive. The net of this experience of the show has been very good."

To start, he wants a new girlfriend. But the way to his heart is not through his stomach.

"I am looking for someone smart and smart and smart and then funny and then beautiful and then smart again," he says. "It all starts up in the head."

Take Halle Berry, for example.

"When I met Halle, I was speechless for one of the first times in my life," DiSpirito says. "The fact that I fell for her didn't mean a damn thing to me at that point."

"She is just on fire. Oh my God! She has this inner light that's amazing."