



Keith Famie's documentary on the Arab-American community is the latest for the filmmaker. BILL PUGLIANO

Second success

Food paves path for chef to become filmmaker

MORE ON THE WEB

You can read more about the people featured in Keith Famie's documentaries and listen to an audio clip by a group of Arabic drummers that performed at a recent pre-screening event at www.crainsdetroit.com/famie.

BY BRENT SNAVELY
CRAIN'S DETROIT BUSINESS

Keith Famie, the Oakland County chef who became nationally known as a "Survivor" contestant, has staked out a second career as successful documentary filmmaker.

Last year, Famie embarked on a project called "Our Story Of" — a series of documentaries about metro Detroit's ethnic communities.

The first hour-long documentary was "Our Italian Story." Since then, Famie has completed Polish, Greek and Arab-American versions. The latest, "Our Arab-American Story," is scheduled to air Saturday at 7 p.m. on **WXYZ, Channel 7**.

"Our Italian Story" won three Emmys from the **Michigan Chapter National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences** in May, and Famie's programs have

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drawn strong ratings when they have aired. Famie's path to filmmaking was an unusual one.

At 22, he was chef de cuisine at the acclaimed **Chez Raphael** in Novi, and by the late 1980s he opened **Les Auteurs** in downtown Royal Oak, a move that helped launch the city's rebirth as a restaurant center.

"That was the hottest place in the city," said Matt Prentice, CEO of Bingham Farms-based **Matt Prentice Restaurant Group**. "Keith has always been quite the showman. He is a very bright guy. He is a very well-schooled culinarian. I think he used his showmanship to promote his credibility as a chef when he was at a really young age."

Famie later transformed **Les Auteurs** into **Durango Grill**, a "cowboy" restaurant that closed in the mid-1990s. He then became executive chef at **Forté** in Birmingham when it opened in 1996.

Throughout the 1990s, Famie was involved in producing a variety of food programs for television. Famie established **Visionalist Entertainment Productions L.L.C.** in 1998 and unwittingly began to lay the groundwork for a second career.

"I was doing at the time a lot of news segments, but I would try and always go and film things in different parts of the world that were film adventure stuff," Famie said.

He landed a half-hour show on **WDIV, Channel 4**, called "Famie's Adventures in Cooking."

Then, in 2000, Famie landed a spot on "Survivor II: The Australian Outback," a **CBS** show that

would catapult him into household around the world.

"Survivor" was then the biggest show on television. And even though Famie's most notable moment on **Survivor** was cooking rice that fellow cast members complained about, Famie said the experience helped him land a show on the **Food Network** called "Keith Famie's Adventures," a show that lasted for 32 episodes.

Getting behind the camera

Until that point, all of Famie's television experience was related to food, and most of it was with Famie in front of the camera.

"My first behind the camera experience, which I seemed to enjoy more than being on camera, is when we did 'Ice Warriors,'" Famie said.

Filmed in 2005, "Ice Warriors" follows the **Red Wings Alumni** team as they tour Russia and play seven hockey games against retired Russian hockey greats. Famie was immediately hooked.

"I was so thrilled about telling this story," Famie said. "I really never thought I'd ever be doing anything like this."

Prior to filming "Ice Warriors," Famie's father, who had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease, had adopted Famie when he

6 weeks old, died. When he died and took his last breath and I was there holding his hand, I was still just kind of dumbfounded by the fact of — this is it? That loss of his father prompted me to dust off an old idea he set aside a few years earlier that was originally called "Rags to Riches."

Famie renamed it "Our Story Of" set off to catalog the stories of metro Detroit's immigrant elders and the communities they had created.

Now 47, Famie has poured his experience into a career for getting people to take about daily emotional struggles.

Famie is no stranger to television production," said Maria Drutz, director of programming at **WXYZ**. "But I think he has really honed his skills. I think if you specifically look at the story-telling, the editing and the photography — it's all first class."

WXYZ broadcasts the "Our Story Of" documentaries commercial-free and typically airs them at 7 p.m. on Saturday or Sunday evenings.

Both the Italian and Polish documentaries drew household ratings between 5 and 7, or between 100,000 to 140,000 households, the same rating that **WXYZ** typically draws during that time slot.

Drutz said **WXYZ** charges Famie for the airtime, but declined to share the specifics.

"I think the fact that Keith travels to his destinations, and so much of the program is shot on location, that I think it is visually very stimulating and extremely well-produced."

In "Our Greek Story," Famie and his crew follows Despina Kartakis to visit her childhood town of Galatas, Crete, where she hid in a cave during WWII while the Nazis bombed her homeland.

During the film, Kartakis points to the cave where she hid and describes how shrapnel from a bomb destroyed her lower jaw and tore through her shoulder.

"In all of the documentaries, I look for that 'Oprah' moment ... where something we film really engages the viewer and helps make them feel close to that culture," Famie said.

But while Famie has a knack for finding people to profile and prompting them to tell their stories, he said he hates the process of raising money to fund the films.

In 2006, Visionalist's total revenue from "Our Italian Story" was about \$175,000, Famie said. This year, Visionalist's annual sales will top about \$600,000.

Key members of Famie's team are Detroit freelance writer Chris Kassel; cinematographer Kevin Hewitt; Visionalist director of business relations Bill Harvey; and **Kinetic Post**, a video editing, sound and production company in Southfield.

Famie said it costs between \$200,000 and \$250,000 to create each film. However, that is a shoe-string budget. Famie said many of the people he works with charge less than their normal professional fees because they believe in the value of the project.

Raising funds

Much of the money raised from past projects is spent immediately on filming the next installments.

Russell Ebeid, president of the glass group of Auburn Hills-based **Guardian Industries Corp.**, said he decided to help fund the Arab-American project by donating \$150,000 of his own money after being approached by an Arab community group and viewing "Our Italian Story."

"I thought, well, this is a way of honoring my parents and memorializing the attributes they gave my brother and I," said Ebeid, a Lebanese-American.

But while Ebeid's support was a tremendous help for the Arab-American installment, Famie said it might have been impossible to complete any of the projects without the support of Toni Wisne Sabina and her restaurant compa-

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ny, **Epoch Restaurant Group**.

Wisne and Epoch have donated, on average, about \$50,000 to each project, Famie said.

Famie's ties to Wisne are deep. Her family owned **Chez Raphael**, and Forté is part of the **Epoch Restaurant Group**.

Epoch benefits from the sponsorship relationship because the pre-screening events take place at the **Rock Financial Showplace**, where Epoch has an exclusive catering contract, said Steve Sabina, Wisne Sabina's husband.

But Sabina said they also believe in the value of the project. Plus, both are Polish and wanted to support the Polish installment.

Next year, Famie plans to complete Indian, Jewish and Japanese segments of "Our Story Of." Also in the planning stages are Chaldean and African-American versions. In fact, Famie says there are 24 different ethnic communities in Detroit that he would like to document.

"The hardest part is we shoot on faith. I have no money raised (for the next installments), but we can't set our schedules. Society sets our schedules," Famie said.

For instance, Famie was filming Hanukkah celebrations last week even though he has barely begun fundraising efforts in the Jewish community.

Because it is so difficult to find funding, Famie and Visionalist are branching out into projects with higher profit potential.

Famie has begun a film called "Saving America," a documentary about Arabic doctors who work in U.S. hospitals, and wants to do a documentary called "Seeing in the Dark," which would profile people who have achieved success despite being blind. Famie believes these films may appeal to **PBS** or **The Learning Channel**.

With all of these projects under way or in the planning, Famie now doubts he will ever return to the kitchen full time.

"That was an exciting part of my life. 'Survivor' was a fun part of my life. But this is something that I can truly say is emotionally gratifying on another level," Famie said.

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Drutz