

SHOWCASE

PAGE 33 | WWW.SUNTIMES.COM | WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2008 | EDITOR: AMANDA BARRETT | Let's get into it.



John Legend is introduced by Paula Deen before taking the stage Monday at the Common Threads benefit.

Grazing with the stars



BILL ZWECKER | The kitchen cognoscenti come out for fund-raiser in Chicago **PAGE 34**



Padma Lakshmi models the dress she later donated for auction.

TOM CRUIZ
SUN-TIMES
PHOTOS

OUTTAKES

"Everyone has experienced a handshake or hug which has turned awkward, and this was no different."

GARY BUSEY, in an apologetic statement about his aggressive embrace of a startled Jennifer Garner while she was doing an Oscar night interview with E! on the red carpet



GLARE

WITH BILL ZWECKER | e-mail: bzwecker@suntimes.com

Tasty recipe for success

Art Smith brings out his fellow celebrity chefs plus singer John Legend for Common Threads benefit

From Padma Lakshmi to Rocco DiSpirito to Ming Tsai and Paula Deen, the foodie celebs used only two words Monday night to explain their attendance at the third annual benefit for Chicago's Common Threads charity event:

Art Smith.

Food Network host Steve McDonagh, half of the Hearty Boys catering and cooking team, summed it up: "There's a lot of chefs who are not well liked, but then there's Art, whom everyone loves."

That affection seemed to carry the night — from the early VIP reception on the stage of the Museum of Contemporary Art's auditorium to the evening's "grazing" party, featuring gourmet tasting stations to a spirited auction of pricey prizes to the musical highlight: a special post-party concert at the James Hotel by John Legend.

More than 500 of Chicago's finest munched and mingled and eventually rocked to Grammy winner Legend, introduced by a new fan, Southern cooking queen Deen.

The evening not only netted more than \$375,000 for Common Threads, but even featured a special treat for members of the crowd who traveled from the MCA to catch the afterparty. Among his musical offerings, Legend debuted a new song: "Good Morning," a tune he had never before performed in public.

Smith, Oprah Winfrey's long-time personal chef who recently left the TV queen to launch his uber-successful Table Fifty-two eatery here, seemed overwhelmed by Monday's success. "I never thought we could top last year, but we have. ... I'm so excited at how fast this idea is catching on."

That idea is really quite simple: Using food and simple cooking



Common Threads benefit co-chair Amanda Puck hands chef Ming Tsai a personalized bottle of Champagne Monday night. | TOM CRUIZE/SUN-TIMES

techniques to teach children — mostly from low-income homes — about nutrition and the diverse cultures. "Art's original words still resonate," said Common Threads executive director Linda Novick O'Keefe. "It's all about teaching kids — through food and cooking — that we are more similar than different."

◆ Ming Tsai, TV cooking star and owner of Boston's famous Blue Ginger restaurant, said the timing of the event also made it "so much easier to bring a lot of us [chefs] here for this. Of course, it's a tremendous cause, but it didn't hurt that they held it during

the Housewares Show — when all of us were in Chicago anyway."

◆ Lakshmi said she was thrilled to be back in the town where last year she taped "Top Chef Chicago," airing now. "I'm even donating the dress off my back tonight!" Turns out, the long-legged beauty did not end up going home naked. She auctioned off a special Marc Jacobs cocktail dress for the cause, "but I did bring something else to change into. I do plan ahead."

◆ Rocco DiSpirito — who gained fame on "The Restaurant," the TV reality show about his ill-fated launch of a Manhattan

restaurant, also was happy to be part of the night's action — and equally excited about his next TV venture: "Rocco Gets Real," airing on A&E beginning June 17. "It's more than about food. It also will be about people's special needs. For example, in one episode I help a girl with brain cancer learn how to cook for the doctors who treated her."

◆ Event co-chair Greg Cameron, co-chair of the event, loved the fact the "World Festival" gala was being held at the museum. "The MCA itself is an institution that's all about the world being a global community. ... But usually people coming here encounter new ideas through art by using their eyes and sometimes their ears ... in this case and for this event, the nose is a lot more important!"

Among those spied enjoying it all were Nora and Sean Conroy, Todd Hatoff, Brenda Barnes, Kimberly Burt, Ken Norgan, Vicki and Bill Hood, Jim Meyer, Carrie Lannon, Chili Pepper, Emmanuel Nony, Lorin Adolph, Rachel Collins, Joan Steel, Julie Latsko, Neal Zucker, Desiree Rogers, Shawn Donnelley, Candace and Chuck Jordan and Martin Gapshis.

NOT AGAIN! Shia LaBeouf again has had another run-in with the law. But once again, it's over a minor infraction. You'll remember, while here filming "Eagle Eye" last fall, the actor was arrested for refusing to leave a Walgreens in the wee hours — clearly intoxicated.

Now LaBeouf faces an arrest warrant for missing a court appearance — having been charged with unlawful smoking outside a Burbank, Calif., gift shop.

To comment on this column, go to suntimes.com.