



COOKIN' ON THE HIGH SIDE WITH MARIO BATALI AND RACHAEL RAY

It's 3 a.m. at Texas Motor Speedway, and Mario Batali's red ponytail is flapping in the breeze. He's gunning a golf cart over an uneven gravel road carved through the track's throbbing shantytown of RVs, trailers, motor homes, and repainted school buses.

"We're on a mission to find the real Americana," Batali says, and he's taking his good pal along for the ride. On the back of the zigzagging cart, Rachael Ray laughs and blows kisses to fans shouting, "We love you Rachael!"

Packed into the infield are thousands of camping and recreational vehicles of varied shapes, sizes, and paint schemes. Some are hitched to huge, cylindrical metal smokers cooking sizzling slabs of choice American beef, which grabs the attention of the super chefs whizzing past converted school buses with crushed-velvet sofas bolted onto the roof and sleek new motor homes that require a jumbo mortgage. The cart's headlights catch the reflection of silver beads dangling from the horns of a wildebeest's head mounted to a school bus painted silver to resemble a 40-foot-long Coors Light can. The beads are everywhere. Fans whooping it up in all directions are awash in them—glittering

strands of gold, ruby, pearl, aquamarine, cherry cola, emerald green. Some are the size of marbles, others big as golf balls. A life-size John Wayne cutout is adorned with several strands. Gold ones for the Duke, who's standing in front of an ambitious and well-constructed place to entertain friends and view the race: scaffolding three stories high with a maze of ladders leading to a large viewing platform and glowing neon sign proclaiming, "The Redneck Taj Mahal."

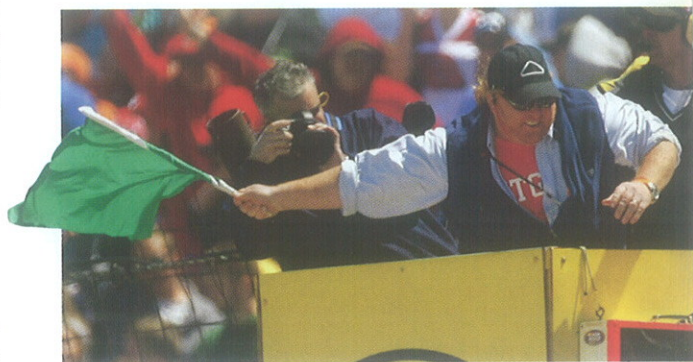
Across the way, "Sweet Home Alabama," the one tune that from the opening guitar lick can take a juiced-up assemblage of fans into blissed-out nirvana, blasts from a cooler equipped with giant speakers. A dozen young men and women are swirling around the amazing refrigerator/boom box. They're engaged in a sort of rhythmic tribal dance, slowly windmilling their arms as if swimming leisurely through the smoky, balmy Texas night.

At the helm of the golf cart, Batali, a gregarious man with a heavy foot and

military-strength radar for locating a good time regardless of the hour, veers down a road doglegging to the left. He instinctively pulls up to a Western saloon – an ingeniously constructed replica of a dusty storefront, the kind of plywood structure you'd see on a Hollywood lot. A hand-painted sign announces, Me 'Til Monday Saloon. "Me maybe till Tuesday," Batali declares.

Rachael Ray doesn't hear that, since she's off the cart before her partner in crime can bring it to a halt. The insanely popular chef, award-winning TV talk show host, magazine publisher, cookware entrepreneur, and best-selling author bursts through swinging saloon-style doors onto an elevated black-and-white-tiled dance floor. In the middle of the floor, the object of everyone's attention, the thing that dominates a scene with plenty of sideshow diversions of eye candy, is a gleaming stripper's pole.

Rachael Ray marvels at the silver pole. It seems to rise improbably from the floor, but after a moment's reflection you can't imagine the Me 'Til Monday Saloon or the raceway without it. Rachael eyes the DJ booth, the giddy, beaded, dancing women, and the rough-edged, crew-cut boys intent on their affection, and she exclaims in a raspy, whiskey-and-sandpaper voice that's fading fast, "We're in the middle of a race



track! These people know how to bring it!"

"Raych, the infield is the heartbeat of NASCAR," Batali shouts. "We happen to be in the geometric center." 📱

For the rest of Mario and Rachel's story, and many more, *The Weekend Starts on Wednesday: True Stories of Remarkable NASCAR Fans*, by Andrew Giangola, is available wherever fine books are sold.