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Lisa & Virginia

BY MERRYN JOHNS

Culinary power couple Lisa Ekus, 56, a literary agent, and Virginia Willis, 46, a writer and culinary TV producer, met in 2006 over a book proposal—and, like a slow-cooked dish, a deliciously meaningful partnership developed.

HOW THEY MET

LISA: I work specifically in the culinary field, representing cookbook authors, food writers and chefs. Virginia sent me her first book proposal, for *Bon Appétit, Y'all: Three Generations of Southern Cooking*. It was the cleanest proposal for a cookbook I had ever received. We were both going to the Greenbrier Food Writers' Conference that year and I made an appointment to meet with her.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

VIRGINIA: We agreed to meet at the conference to discuss whether she would take me on as a client or not. Then, we actually wound up on the bus together from the airport to the hotel. I was terrified. She had this incredible reputation as a powerful force in culinary publishing and promotion. I had heard she was less than receptive to overzealous stalker-type cookbook author wannabes. So I was really quiet and shy. She thought I was being standoffish.

LISA: Virginia's initial appeal to me was strictly business—as an extraordinary food writer. She was beautiful as well: Chanel red lipstick, pearls and a way with a sentence that made me determined to represent her on the spot. I didn't know until later that she had made me her first choice to represent her and never even approached another agent.

Virginia Willis (left) and Lisa Ekus

HOW THEY GOT TOGETHER

LISA: Our relationship was all business, and grew into a friendship, which deepened over the years. When I first met Virginia, she was in a long-term relationship, and I was married [to a man] and had no inkling I would fall in love with her. I have always loved the wisdom and friendship of women, but never considered that I was gay. I still believe and feel that it is who Virginia is as an individual that made me fall in love with her. And, I have to say, we laugh that I “took to it like a duck to water.” My comfort level with this woman is far greater than I have ever felt with the men in my life.

WHO MADE THE FIRST MOVE

VIRGINIA: Well, that’s complicated. I was gay and, as far as I knew, she was straight. Then, we slowly started flirting. After months of cautious flirting, I told her I wanted to kiss her, and she said, “Well, go ahead.” As I kissed her, I sat on my hands. I was scared to death, but it was also so I would temper my romantic moves.

LISA: We never looked back. And that first kiss did indeed

change everything. I have never been kissed like that in my life.

TAKING IT FURTHER

LISA: Over the course of the next few years we both extricated ourselves from our relationships. The decisions were hard and painful for both of us. But we were determined to be together and had enormous patience.

HOW THEY COLLABORATE

VIRGINIA: If a company wants to work with me, it goes through the Lisa Ekus Group. Anything that involves a contract goes through the agency. I bring them work and they bring me work. It’s mutually beneficial. I am her sounding board for many things, as well. We keep confidence, since I am a client as well, but, at the end of the day, we are just good together.

LISA: We work together pretty much daily. We are part of making most of her deals, advising on new book projects, pitching her for talent gigs, and overall consultation on her career. The piece that many people don’t see is how fiercely determined

and motivated Virginia is, along with her ability to write a sweet sentence around anyone and anything. She creates almost all her own success. We make the business deals around that success.

ON RESOLVING CONFLICT

VIRGINIA: We don’t fight much. We’re apart just enough that the phrase “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” makes sense. It’s a little cliché, but the truth of it is that, with our history, we’re very appreciative of each other and our relationship.

LISA: I’m far more fiery and quick to snap. Virginia is patient and thoughtful. She knows exactly how to defuse pretty much any situation so I don’t blow up. We talk it all through. My only frustration, and we laugh at this a lot, is that I’m Northern and speak quickly and without filtering much of anything I say. Virginia is Southern, far more thoughtful, and edits her words before she speaks. I still bite my tongue and try desperately to not interrupt her long thought process. And I’ve benefited from learning to be far more patient! Do we have differences of opinions sometimes? Sure. Do we work it out? Always.

WHY THEY WORK SO WELL TOGETHER

VIRGINIA: I slow her down and she speeds me up. I can share with her what [other] authors know and don’t know, what they are thinking, and how they might respond to certain things. I appreciate her creativity with business, connecting people and making things work. I respect her immensely because she is a hard worker,

too. I appreciate her drive and commitment. Most of all, I have enormous respect for her integrity. She doesn’t just follow the money—she follows the talent. It’s not just about the hot chef off the next reality show.

LISA: That Virginia is the creative and in-front person, and I’m the business and behind-the-scenes, works brilliantly for us. The mutual respect we have for each other’s strengths and skills, and our willingness to discuss opportunities and challenges, makes us a power couple. We have each other’s best interests at heart.

ADVICE TO LESBIAN COUPLES WORKING TOGETHER

LISA: Clear parameters on life and work have to be set. Virginia has these expressions: “I need to talk to my Agent Lady,” or “I need to talk to my Girlfriend.” That clues us both in as to the type of conversation and the results needed. Agent Lady is about business, and Girlfriend is “Hear me out and comfort me. Don’t try to solve it or charge for it.” Not everything has the resolution you want or hope for, but so much does. Focus on that. Kiss each other good morning and good night each and every day.

VIRGINIA: Of course, sometimes we make mistakes, and we might wind up taking the office home, but we acknowledge it and try to make it better the next day. There have been a lot of folks that have been dubious about the success of our relationship, but I really knew very early on that we had something special—I just needed to be patient enough so that it would all work out. (lisaekus.com, virginiawillis.com) ●

