

## Sandra Lee and Andrew Cuomo: A Love Story

**Attorney General Andrew Cuomo and Food Network star Sandra Lee are the Brangelina of New York politics. But will their quest for privacy and her down-market persona unravel his ambitions?**

By Annie Karni



Photo: David X Prutting/Patrick McMullan

Andrew Cuomo greases up the customized Harley-Davidson Dyna that sits in his garage, revving the engine. His girlfriend hops onto the back of his bike, and the two take off on the country roads of Westchester County, N.Y., wisps of her flaxen hair escaping her helmet and blowing in the wind. New York's attorney general and his celebrity girlfriend, Food Network shortcut-cooking queen Sandra Lee, are out for a private pleasure cruise. Upstate and out of the limelight, it's just "Sandy" and "Andy," as they call each other, alone on the open road.

Since they started dating three summers ago, Cuomo and Lee—perhaps the most unlikely power couple after Kate Hudson and Alex Rodriguez—have attempted to keep their relationship under the radar, even though individually they both have sought the

spotlight. "You almost never see them out together," says society chronicler David Patrick Columbia, who runs the Web site [NewYorkSocialDiary.com](http://NewYorkSocialDiary.com). "They're not a part of any scene. He's never been a very social person, and I've only ever seen her at lunch at [midtown media power spot] Michael's.

"Although the couple strives to avoid the limelight, keeping their relationship—for the most part—behind closed doors, "Sandrew" is rapidly becoming the Brangelina of politics.

The dark-haired Italian Cuomo—son of former New York governor Mario and once one of *Playgirl's* most eligible bachelors—and the perky blond homemaking expert aren't theater buffs or cultural connoisseurs, according to friends and colleagues. They're not regulars at any of the city's top restaurants. Instead, Lee often cooks Italian food for Cuomo, whose favorite meal is her simple lasagna, which she prepares with canned tomato soup, cottage cheese and ground chuck.



Photo: David X Prutting/Patrick McMullan

Lee and Cumo in 2006

Cuomo's secretary is in touch regularly with Lee's assistant to sync their hectic schedules. They're both workaholics whose scarce free time is spent vegging out on the couch in their apartment at the Trump building on Wall Street, catching up on their favorite reality shows: *Deadliest Catch* and *Ice Road Truckers*. "We're both so beat up at the end of the day with what we do, we're very happy to sit on the couch and watch TV," said Lee in an unpublished interview obtained by *Page Six Magazine*, describing her low-key home life

with Cuomo. "I can certainly be part of the socialite group and walk those carpets every day, but I choose not to because I prefer to be grounded. You can't be at home and on the red carpet."

Cuomo's three daughters from his first marriage to Kerry Kennedy—twins Cara and Mariah, 14, and Michaela, 12—spend Wednesdays, Thursdays, every other weekend and half of the summer with Cuomo and Lee, referring to Lee as their "weekend mommy." Though Lee has said she never planned to have children of her own, she is happy to join Cuomo as he passes afternoons on the sidelines of soccer fields and track meets to cheer on his athletic daughters. For vacation last August, Lee and Cuomo took a 10-day cruise to Alaska with his brood because the girls wanted to see polar bears.

But as talk of a gubernatorial run for 51-year-old Cuomo begins to intensify—he enjoys a 67 percent job approval rating, and the most recent polls show him trouncing David Paterson by a 59-point margin—politicos are already speculating about whether dating a professedly down-market TV personality like Lee is an asset or a recipe for disaster.

They are also raising eyebrows over exactly what public role Lee might play in a political race, as Cuomo and Lee have no plans to marry, according to sources from their camp. Should the pair decline to tie the knot, Cuomo could find himself serving as the first unmarried governor since Hugh Carey in 1975. But political insiders say that after the Spitzer prostitute scandal and Paterson's admitted extramarital affairs, New Yorkers are unlikely to make much of their governor's marital status—as long as he's not caught in a sex scandal.



Photo: Helayne Seidman

Cuomo with then wife Kennedy in 2002

Lee, 43, couldn't be more different from New York's former first ladies. Unlike the graceful Harvard-trained lawyer Silda Spitzer or Michelle Paterson, the down-to-earth health administrator, Lee moves in a world completely removed from politics. She's also nothing like Cuomo's first wife, Kerry Kennedy, a lawyer, human rights activist and member of the toothy Kennedy clan.

Instead, Lee is part of the Food Network elite. On one popular episode of her hit show, *Semi-Homemade Cooking*, Lee walks on the beach in a low-cut red dress and a push-up bikini top, her blond locks tied back in two pigtailed. She is working herself into a tizzy discussing halibut tacos with peach salsa: "They are so impressive that your guests will think you spent hours, but they only take minutes!" she gushes. "Yum!" Lee purrs as she leans over the grill, and you start to wonder if this G-rated cooking demo is about to get X-rated.

Lee seems an unlikely foil for Cuomo, who takes great pains to be seen as a serious lawyer focused only on his work. But Lee's no ditzy beach bunny, even if she's good at faking it. Her accessible "semi-homemade" cooking has spawned a rapidly growing, unbelievably simple brand. (Sandra Lee's popular Thanksgiving in a Pot recipe calls for Lawry's turkey gravy mix and a can of condensed Campbell's mushroom soup). Lee sells her no-frills approach with her bubbly personality—and the package has earned her two television shows, an eponymous magazine, and 16 best-selling cookbooks.

And she created her growing empire, literally, from scratch.



Photo: MARCY NIGHSWANDER/STF/AP IMAGES

Kerry Kennedy and Andrew Cuomo at their 1990 wedding

When Lee was almost 2, a toddler born to teenage parents in suburban Los Angeles, her mother dropped her and her younger sister off at their grandmother's house, telling the girls she was running out for milk. She didn't return for four years.

"I don't ever remember hearing any rational explanations or even any conversations about [my mother's] absence, but I do recall wondering where she was," Lee writes in her 2007 memoir, *Made From Scratch*. When Lee's mother returned without the milk but with a new husband in tow, ready to reclaim her abandoned children, she offered them a life of poverty, abuse and neglect. The family lived on food stamps, and Lee was often left to cook and clean for the household.

In 1982, when Lee was 16, she left her dysfunctional mother and moved to Wisconsin to live with her father, who that same year was arrested for domestic violence against his new wife and convicted and sentenced to two years in jail for sexual assault. Lee moved out when she was about 18, working at a pet store to support herself. She started college but dropped out after two years. Later, she enrolled in a program at the Cordon Bleu's Ottawa outpost.

Lee's first professional break came in the late 1990s when she was working the infomercial circuit, hawking Kurtain Kraft, a home-decorating product she created. In 1998, she was moonlighting as a TV spokeswoman for KB Home when she met the home-building company's millionaire CEO, Bruce Karatz, whose lavish lifestyle would sweep her off her feet.



Photo: RICHARD PATTERSON/PR NEWSWIRE

Lee with Cumo and her potential in-laws, Mario and Matilda Cuomo

"I felt like a real-life Cinderella," Lee writes of Karatz's courtship. "It was a nonstop schedule that included frequent trips to Paris and the south of France. Le Bristol Hotel became my second home... Nearly every night we ended up in the same place, the nightclub at the Hotel Byblos, dancing until the wee hours of the morning." June was spent in Saint-Tropez, July was spent in Capri, and August was spent in L.A., where her

calendar was suddenly filled with country club lunches and charity galas. The couple married in 2001.

Lee also used her newfound social status to pitch her Semi-Homemade cookbook to publishers in Manhattan. After hosting a guest spot on the Today show, a Food Network executive approached Lee and offered her a TV show. But as Lee's career took off, her marriage started crumbling. "I realized I no longer wanted that lifestyle when Bruce chartered a beautiful yacht for us [to sail] around the Baltic Sea... My heart was no longer into the carefree party lifestyle." She filed for divorce in 2005, and the couple parted on good terms.

"Our marriage was short, we parted amicably, she went on, and I think she's doing pretty well," Karatz tells Page Six Magazine. "I haven't had contact with her since our divorce." But last March, Karatz was indicted on multiple charges of fraud for backdating millions of dollars in his company's stock options, having allegedly padded the lush life he shared with Lee by cooking the books.

It's the hard knocks that Lee took before she shot to fame that make her relatable to Cuomo, according to friends. "The Cuomos are a self-made family," says a family friend. "Andrew's grandfather ran a grocery store. Andrew and Sandra have both overcome tremendous obstacles, they've both seen hardship in their lives and both dealt with issues of rejection. Neither one of them was an overnight success."



Photo: Dave Allocca/startraks Photo

Bruce Colley

Cuomo's relatively new relationship also allows him to gracefully escape the public shame of his first marriage, political observers say. "Cuomo doesn't want to talk about his divorce in a campaign—who would?" says political operative Roger Stone. "This is a love story New Yorkers will like and focus on instead of digging up the past."

And it doesn't hurt that Cuomo's new gal pal is a celebrity in her own right. "He goes from a Kennedy to a TV star—it makes sense that it would have to be someone big," says New York University urban policy professor Mitchell Moss, referring to Cuomo's messy split from Kerry Kennedy in 2003. "Sandra's not in the shadow of a Kennedy, because she's even more public than his first wife." Cuomo and Lee, who both declined to be interviewed for this piece, almost never speak about their relationship to the press. Insiders say their silence is something that Cuomo learned the hard way, after blurring the relationship between the personal and political in his failed first marriage.

Cuomo married Kerry Kennedy in 1990 at the Cathedral of St. Matthew in Washington, D.C., and high-profile guests at the black-tie affair included Governor Mario Cuomo, Mayor David Dinkins, Senator Ted Kennedy, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, Caroline Kennedy and Maria Shriver.

Andrew was a political ingenue. At the age of 25, after graduating from Albany Law School, he ran his father's gubernatorial campaign and then worked as a top policy aide in his dad's administration. He went on to become housing czar under President Clinton between 1997 and 2001 before mounting his own campaign for governor in 2002. Cuomo used the Cuomolot marriage as a campaign strategy: It was reported that his Web site displayed more photos of Kennedy than of himself and that at a fundraising event, his wife dominated the mike, introducing him with a 45-minute speech. Kennedy even reportedly gushed to reporters about how Cuomo courted her by offering her a motorcycle ride to see the Brooklyn housing projects he was working on.



Photo: Luiz C Ribeiro/NY Post

Lee's ex, KB Home's former CEO Bruce Karatz with Martha Stewart

But Cuomo's bright political future and personal life suddenly crashed and burned. In September 2002, he dropped out of the Democratic primary for governor after an off-putting campaign. "The more voters saw of him, the less they liked him," explains one political operative. "He was overly aggressive; he was the foremost expert on everything; he was way too cocky—it was just way too much Andrew, and he was everywhere."

Then, in 2003, his fairy-tale marriage to Kennedy ended when Cuomo caught her cheating on him with handsome polo player Bruce Colley, who was a close family friend. The demise of Cuomolot was tabloid gold. "MERRY KERRY SWAPS SLEAZE FOR SEAS," proclaimed the Post when Kennedy escaped on a weekend jaunt to Cape Cod. "HANDS OFF—ANDREW'S WARNING TO KERRY'S PLAYMATE," the Post reported as Cuomo warned Colley to stay away from his family.

Andrew Cuomo, whom friends described as "completely devastated" by his setbacks, looked like he was down for the count. But in 2006, he defeated Jeanine Pirro in the race to succeed Eliot Spitzer as attorney general. Since then, he's made a name for himself investigating Wall Street bonus scandals and pension fraud, emerging as the most popular elected official in New York. The happy stories of Cuomo's political rehabilitation over the past few years leave out a key ingredient: The woman who is behind him on the back of his Harley. "He had two traumatizing experiences—the divorce and the first run for governor," says a longtime Cuomo pal. "He's slowly rebuilt his career, and having a strong relationship with someone he respects is part of that equation."

Some political strategists say a tall, lithe, blond, all-American celebrity girlfriend is a political boon for Cuomo. "In terms of their media attractiveness, it would be a plus," says political consultant Doug Muzzio. "[The romance] reminds people that he had a rough divorce in which he was the victim. If there's a 'sympathy vote' for Andrew Cuomo, that's where it is."



Photo: Brian K. Diggs/AP IMAGES

Cuomolot in happier times.

Cuomo and Lee met by chance at a party during the summer of 2006. The freshly divorced Lee, who lived in Southern California at the time, was staying on Long Island with her friend Alexandra Stanton, who had worked with Cuomo on his 2002 campaign.

Stanton threw a party at her mother's Bridgehampton mansion, and Cuomo showed up with his three daughters. Friends say Cuomo had never heard of Lee. "He was not exactly a Food Network aficionado," jokes a source close to Cuomo. Lee wasn't exactly up on New York politics, either. She knew little about the single dad, whose tweenage daughters were eyeing her from across the patio. "[Cuomo's daughter] Michaela, who is into fashion, was just looking at me like I was from another planet, computing my outfit. And then the twins and I went for a walk," she recalls in the unpublished interview. Lee and Cuomo started dating a few months later and didn't confirm their relationship to the press for two years.

Lee has since moved on from her previous marriage, eschewing the glamorous life it afforded her. "My years of living the jet-set life were fun, but they weren't fulfilling," she writes in her memoir. "The perks and benefits were lovely, but all of the fabulous furs, fancy jewelry and fun fêtes simply weren't enough to fill my soul." Her memoir makes no mention of Cuomo, except for one sentence in the acknowledgments: "To Andrew, Mariah, Cara and Michaela, for keeping me focused and for bringing me much joy."

But Lee may be thrust back into the spotlight if she moves into the governor's mansion with Cuomo next year. So far, there's no indication that Lee plans to fit any first lady mold.

"Will you still cook once you get to the governor's mansion?" TV host Wendy Williams asked Lee on a recent show, while the blond chef, dressed in a belted black leather-trimmed number, demonstrated how to make cowboy stew.

"I will cook," Lee answered, looking distractedly at the table in front of her. "And do you know what I'm going to bring when I go to the governor's mansion? Great garnishes!"