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Sisters Caroline, left and Dina Manzo are as "thick as thieves" and make their debut Tuesday night (11 ET/PT) in Bravo's *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*.

By Todd Plitt, USA TODAY

'Housewives of New Jersey' adding bite to the brand

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By Olivia Barker, USA TODAY

FRANKLIN LAKES, N.J. — Last summer, America met a pit bull with lipstick from Wasilla, Alaska. This summer, the country will be introduced to a pit bull with a pixie cut from this northern New Jersey town who grows a tagline far more intimidating than "You betcha!"

"Let me tell you something about my family," snarls Caroline Manzo in a preview episode of *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*, Bravo's fourth and, some are saying, fiercest installment of the so-catty-it's-almost-camp franchise. "We are as thick as thieves, and we protect each other to the end."

Manzo is the matriarch of the five newest members of Bravo's *Housewives* family, who make their debut Tuesday night (11 ET/PT), three years after cliques of affluent, socially ambitious, amply coiffed chicks from Orange County, Calif. — and then New York and Atlanta— began extending their claws on national TV.



Enlarge Bravo

Jacqueline Laurita says: "We used to joke around, 'Can you imagine if we were on a reality show?'"

Although the audiences are relatively small — the recent fourth season of *Orange County* averaged 2.2 million viewers, and Season 2 of *New York City* has averaged 1.7 million — they're building every season. The latest edition of *Orange County* was up 45% from Season 3, and while *New York City* has shot up 62% over last year. Three seasons of *Housewives*, one each from *Orange County*, *New York City* and *Atlanta*, stand among Bravo's current top five shows. And there's impact far beyond the *Housewives*' corner of cable. The franchise has spawned swag (Ramona Singer of *New York City* and her Tru Renewal skin-care line), books (*New York City's* LuAnn de Lesseps, an aristocrat by marriage, and her new etiquette guide, *Class With the Countess*) and, of course, scandal (the aforementioned countess' split from her count husband, largely over e-mail).

"People like seeing inside other people's lives when they're fun and dramatic and relatable and sometimes shocking," says Bravo general manager Frances Berwick. "There's pure voyeurism that makes it utterly compelling."

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Each series constitutes "the perfectly made reality show," says Richard Lawson, who has wryly recapped the *New York City* episodes on gossip blog Gawker and plans to do the same with *New Jersey*. Thanks to the editing, the characters are "treated half kindly and half, really, mocked." The result is that "you don't hate these people, but you don't like them. They're fun to laugh at — and maybe you're laughing with them."

'Take a gander' through the gates

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Their cluelessness is part of the charm, watchers say. Living on a gilded, sometimes gated, cloud, "they think their life is so glamorous, but sometimes it doesn't really look that glamorous," says Annie Scudder, editor of *TrèsSugar*, a sex and culture site that blogs regularly about the *Housewives*. "These people think they have everything," but take a gander through those gates, "and would you want that?"

Some say the show hit critical sass — or crass — when it moved to New York and the new crew continued those shamelessly big-spending ways, scooping up a \$16,000 handbag, for instance, despite the deepening recession.

But if anyone fears that real-world slump plus reality-TV sumptuousness equals unbridled backlash (and reduced ratings), fear not. The response has been quite the contrary, Berwick says.

"It's escapist TV, which is more important now than ever," says *New York City's* Alex McCord, a mother of two whose published topless photos caused a castmate tiff on a recent episode.

But if *New York City* has been a town-car wreck — junior-high style fights between grown women; lace-up red leather pants worn by a grown man — *New Jersey* is shaping up to be a Range Rover wreck, from talk of Colombian cartels and kidnapping to enough combined cleavage to fill a K cup to, most memorably, a fully set table — silverware, white linen — that gets overturned in a fit of apparent rage.

"There were a lot of crumbs on the table," deadpans *New Jersey* housewife Jacqueline Laurita, 39, Manzo's sister-in-law and the apparent comedian of the group. Longtime friend and castmate Teresa Giudice was "trying to get them off. She was very upset about that. She's a very clean person."

"Of course they had to put that in," says Giudice, 36, who is understandably coy about revealing what led her to go primal on a piece of furniture. "Nobody wants to watch a boring show."

New Jersey is the first family-centric version of the franchise — aside from Manzo and Laurita, there's Dina Manzo, who is married to her sister's husband's brother. Even before the cameras descended last summer, "there was always drama and laughing," Laurita says. "Everybody's pretty open and honest. We used to joke around, 'Can you imagine if we were on a reality show?'"

When putting together a season of *Housewives*, via casting calls and word of mouth, producers typically look for one or two women and build the cast around their inner circles. With obvious nods to *Desperate Housewives* and *The OC*, the original, *Orange County*, emerged thanks to a tip from one of the residents of a gated community there, Coto de Caza.

Producers were "intrigued enough to shoot tape of some of the women," says Bravo programming and production chief Andy Cohen. A phenomenon was born.

"We interview a ton of people and sort of whittle them down," Berwick says. (For *New Jersey*, 15 to 20 were under consideration.) "We want women who we feel are reflective of our audience, so we look for an educated, articulate, smart" and, yes, affluent mix.

The new, *New Jersey* family dynamic "could either make it boring, because they could hold back," says McCord, who has met all of the *Jersey* girls. "Or it could make it bloody."

'Sopranos'-like in New Jersey

Speaking of bloody, consider the setting: The imposing beige-brick houses, the North Jersey locale, the Italian last names, the aspirations of strip-club ownership (as relayed by Caroline Manzo's middle child, the appropriately named Christopher) — it's all so seemingly *Sopranos*.

"Oh, bring it on!" says cast member Danielle Staub, 46, the relative outsider of the clan, whose tastes range from tanning beds to phone sex to bikini-and-high-heel outfits. The comparison is "so funny," she says. "I mean, we do cook, we do live in New Jersey and we do fight with our families and we're loud." But "we're not whacking people, although we might give them a good thrashing verbally."

The Sopranos was "unbelievable," says Caroline Manzo, 48, relaxing in the nearly 30-foot-high great room of her 6,000-square-foot house. "Did I relate to a lot that was going on? Absolutely not. Did I relate to the family aspect of it? Totally." Take Carmela Soprano. "She brought the cannolis to school. Guess what? That's what Mommy does."

She may lash out once in a while with take-no-prisoners tawk — "If there's an issue, I don't back away, and when I bite, I bite with teeth" — but behind the tough accent, "there's a total opposite side to me that's a marshmallow."

Manzo brandishes a tray brimming with doughnuts for visitors and keeps their coffee mugs filled. When oldest son Albie was an undergrad at Fordham University in the Bronx, she'd drive the 30 minutes to deliver homemade eggplant parmigiana. She'd do his laundry, tucking notes among the clean clothes: "Mommy loves you. Study hard."

So Dina Manzo, 37, is almost believable when, sitting next to her sister, she innocently responds to a query with "What drama? What are you talking about?" Her tagline? "If you think I'm a bitch, bring it on."

The Manzos have become increasingly infamous in their leafy suburb. Patrons at the gourmet food shop snub Dina Manzo. "It's hard to shop at the Market Basket these days, but that's OK," she says.

Some residents, however, are eagerly awaiting the peek into their neighbors' windows. Walking to her silver BMW SUV in the parking lot in front of the Market Basket, town newcomer Melissa Elliott says she plans on gathering weekly to watch at the house of friends who happen to live on the same street as one of the cast members.

"They say (the show) looks accurate," says Elliott, 45, who is neither a housewife nor a wife (she works in retail management). And she can see why: "Oh, my God — there's drama here without being on TV."

One might think that by now, the pool of women willing to broadcast their cringe-worthy gaffes and subject themselves to oh-no-she-didn't guffaws would have shrunk. But *Atlanta* Season 2 is in production, *Orange County* Season 5 has been announced, and Berwick assures that the franchise's momentum hasn't crested.

The ever-growing interest is indicative of our increasingly over-shared, over-documented culture, Berwick says. *Housewives* is "the ultimate Facebook, and you're friending everybody" — or, perhaps, frenemy-ing them.

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Philsy (0 friends, send message) wrote: 5h 27m ago
I'm originally from Central NJ and now live in Southern NJ. This show should be called The Real Housewives of NORTH Jersey. No sense maligning the entire state. It's bad enough that all Italians will once again be called on the carpet since I believe all but one are Italian - of the NORTH Jersey persuasion.

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J.W. TX (1 friends, send message) wrote: 7h 58m ago
Thy all are so shallow. I had to painstakingly watch them against my will because I was at someone esle's house. I will never again. I just happen to see Bruce Jenner on that episode & man his face is so stretched out he has no face left dude.

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halnova (0 friends, send message) wrote: 10h 45m ago
Yeah yeah yeah. Thick as thieves. Protect each other until the end. Blah Blah Blah.Once the camera's red light comes on, it changes people's behavior. Knowing people liked and miss the Sopranos, she has taken it upon herself to bring some "jersey family" back to television. and she's laying it on thick. Watch the show and you'll see straight through it. A total joke.

~~~~~  
It did seem a bit forced last night. Those sons of hers seem more like the Gotti brothers.

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kt1956 (0 friends, send message) wrote: 12h 19m ago  
I would rather see a reality show " HOUSEWIVES OF CRAIG'S LIST " . Now that would be a rating's winner.

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Kar (0 friends, send message) wrote: 14h 27m ago  
I suspect Caroline will be the breakout star. We've seen the implant-laden trophy wives shop before, but that gal has teeth. The others may be good at a catfight, but that lady doesn't stop until one of her sons gets a shovel.

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crick (5 friends, send message) wrote: 1d 2h ago  
Yeah yeah yeah. Thick as thieves. Protect each other until the end. Blah Blah Blah. ....Once the camera's red light comes on, it changes people's behavior. Knowing people liked and miss the Sopranos, she has taken it upon herself to bring some "jersey family" back to television. and she's laying it on thick. Watch the show and you'll see straight through it. A total joke.

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Two Sense (2 friends, send message) wrote: 1d 3h ago



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JW Goethe (10 friends, send message) wrote: 8h 50m ago  
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\*\*\*\*\*

Geez. go to a political story. I am ready for a breather from all the political sparring.

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kaddy (0 friends, send message) wrote: 1d 4h ago  
as if being from NJ wasn't embarrassing enough already.....

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Rocco1 (127 friends, send message) wrote: 1d 4h ago  
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