



Eateries show off tastes of 'Top Chef' vets

By Tina Dirmann, Special for USA TODAY – November 7, 2008

Fans of the hit Bravo show Top Chef, which returns for its fifth season Wednesday, have seen their favorite cooks whip up extravagant dishes under the toughest made-for-reality TV scenarios — time crunches, ingredient restrictions, infighting.

Now fans can be their own judge by stepping inside one of the restaurants across the country run by former contestants. The TV lights may have dimmed, but the drive to create the best dish in town lives on.

"When you have a passion for something, you are competitive," says Spike Mendelsohn, a Season 4 "cheftestant" who opened Good Stuff Eatery in Washington, D.C., in July to lines that stretched into the street.

The real star on the menu is Spike's Five Napkin Burger. The patty recipe alone — a special blend of short ribs, brisket and a secret dose of fat — took Mendelsohn a year to perfect. Add applewood smoked bacon, an egg and American cheese on a brioche bun smothered in — here's where the napkins come in — Good Stuff sauce, a mix of mayonnaise, molasses, rice wine vinegar and a secret ingredient.

"A friend of mine was eating one yesterday, and he had sauce all over his chin," Mendelsohn brags.

But Richard Blais, who battled Mendelsohn in Season 4, isn't giving his showmate the last word on burgers. Blais is the creative director for Flip, an Atlanta-based restaurant opening in late November that will offer modern hamburgers and a liquid nitrogen milkshake bar. "I use liquid nitrogen in cooking like other chefs use frying oil," says Blais, who used the trick on Top Chef to score extra pizzazz points from the judges.

Look for other surprises, such as sliceable ketchup — it has the consistency of soft cheese but takes on the texture of regular ketchup in your mouth — and unique burger options, including the pâte melt, using French pâte on brioche bread, topped with smoked mayonnaise, basil, mint and cilantro.

Out in San Diego, Season 3 contestant Brian Malarkey, executive chef at the Oceanaire Seafood Room, prefers his signature dishes a little "angry."

"It's got to have some kick to it," he says.

For his angry lobster entrée, Malarkey poaches the lobster, then tosses it onto a grill before splitting the shell to sauté the tender meat in generous doses of butter, garlic, chillies, orange zest and basil.

Fellow Season 3 competitor Camille Becerra continues to run Paloma, the busy Brooklyn-based restaurant she launched before falling short of the Top Chef title. Her current fall favorite is a falafel made with a red lentils-and-curry-leaf mixture and served along seared scallops.

In West Palm Beach, Fla., Stephen Asprinio from Season 1 opened Forte di Asprinio in March. He proudly pushes his signature dish, also prepared on the show: a butter-poached Maine lobster served with a caramelized cauliflower and finished with an airy saffron vanilla sauce.

"People remember this dish from the show," Asprinio says. "They get excited when they see it on the menu because they want to try it themselves."

Back on the West Coast, Erik Hopfinger from Season 4 keeps busy as executive chef of San Francisco's Circa, where his lobster corn dogs are a huge hit. (Ironic, since it was a corn dog dish that got him axed from the show.)

Los Angeles chef Antonia Lofaso, also from Season 4, created a new bar menu for the celebrity hot spot Foxtail Lounge in West Hollywood that focuses on smaller bites, sweet treats, such as crispy apple doughnuts served with choice of dipping sauces.

Of those who walked away with the actual Top Chef title (and \$100,000 prize), only Season 1 champ Harold Dieterle has his New York restaurant, Perilla, up and running. His menu offers one dish similar to one created the show — a grilled hanger steak with sunchoke creamed spinach (the original had lamb) — but Dieterle now shies away from the spotlight.

"I don't like going into the dining room," he says. "I'm more comfortable back in my kitchen."

The remaining Top Chef champs have plans in the works. Season 2 winner Ilan Hall will launch a new place in Los Angeles, Season 3 champ Hung Huynh has a spot in New York coming soon, and Season 4 Top Chef Stephanie Izard is looking at Chicago.

Some past competitors do step away from their kitchens long enough to watch the new crop of Top Chef contenders.

"I have to," Malarkey says. "Some nights, no one even cares what I'm making. They just want to talk about Top Chef."



"Some kick to it": That's how Brian Malarkey likes dishes at San Diego's Oceanaire Seafood Room, such as his angry lobster which is poached, grilled, split and sautéed.