

Cambridge boasts two kitchen stars on 'Top Chef Masters'

By Jed Gottlieb | Sunday, April 4, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | Dining News

Pound for pound, Cambridge is the greatest culinary city in America.

Foodies on the Charles' left bank have long championed this bold assertion. Now outsiders - the brains behind Bravo's "Top Chef Masters" - have given some credence to Cantabrigians' culinary claims.

For the second season of "Top Chef Masters" (debuting Wednesday at 11 p. m.), two Cambridge cooks were picked to compete against their peers from New York, Los Angeles and other million-strong cities.

No Bostonians made the cut, but Rialto's Jody Adams and Oleana's Ana Sortun will be featured alongside such heavy-hitters as Govind Armstrong and Ludo Lefebvre. They're competing to win a prize for the charity of their choice and the bragging rights of being named Top Chef Master.

What would make Adams and Sortun want to try to outwit celebrity chefs while cooking against the clock, turning junk food into haute cuisine or similarly ridiculous (and ridiculously entertaining) challenges?

"I grew up without a TV and never even watched Julia (Child) until I was in my 20s," Adams said from her Charles Hotel office above Rialto. "I sounded like a bit of a crank when I talked about shows like this. I sounded like my father, like a Luddite."

After doing some research, she began to see both the value and the genius in such programs as "Iron Chef" and "Top Chef" series - their ability to showcase food as art and craft while entertaining.

"I realized it wasn't about the perfect meal," she said. "It was about the challenge of being part of that challenge with other chefs."

Sortun also had concerns about appearing on the show. A fan of the first season, she just didn't think TV was for her and decided to pass.

"When I told my kitchen, I saw their faces drop," Sortun said from a table at her Hampshire Street, Turkish-inspired restaurant. "Then my chef de cuisine, Cassie, who I've worked with for seven years, wrote me this two-page e-mail on why I had to do the show."

Sortun saw a chance to further her food agenda.

"As someone who loves Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cooking, I wanted a chance to show people that it's more than just hummus and tabouli," she said.

Promoting their food philosophies is important to both chefs.

Neither Sortun nor Adams gets much time to expound upon these philosophies on the program. They're too busy chopping, sautéing and scrambling. But their cooking styles and restaurants clearly reflect their values and the values of Cambridge: kooky, clever, creative and super green.

Oleana and Rialto have seasonal menus that depend on available local produces. During the growing season, Sortun's husband's organic farm in Sudbury provides all of the restaurant's produce. Rialto estimates that during the spring, summer and fall, 75 percent of the ingredients that go into its menu come from a half-dozen local farms.

Asked about Cambridge's best places, Adams easily rattles off a list of impressive restaurants along the Red Line from Kendall to Davis - such as East Coast Grill, Dali, Gargoyles on the Square and Chez Henri.

"These are mostly restaurants driven by powerful chefs with personality," she said.



Photo by Jaimie Trueblood/Bravo

Adams and Sortun certainly fit that description.

But powerful talents with bushels of personality are the bread and butter of the "Top Chef Masters" series.

Both chefs said they were terrified going into their first challenges. Not of their competitors - mostly friends they've crossed paths with after years in the high-end food world - but of the speed at which they had to think, work and get creative. Last season's tasks included cooking a three-course meal in a dorm room and whipping up desserts for Girl Scouts. This season, the challenges were equally devilish.

"I was nervous, but once I got in the kitchen, I realized, 'Oh, it's just a kitchen. I know this.' And I went to work," Adams said.

While their onscreen skills may not definitively prove that Cambridge is the greatest culinary city in America, both chefs think their performances were up to Cambridge's lofty foodie standards.

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