

jbfnotes

THE JAMES BEARD FOUNDATION MEMBER NEWSLETTER

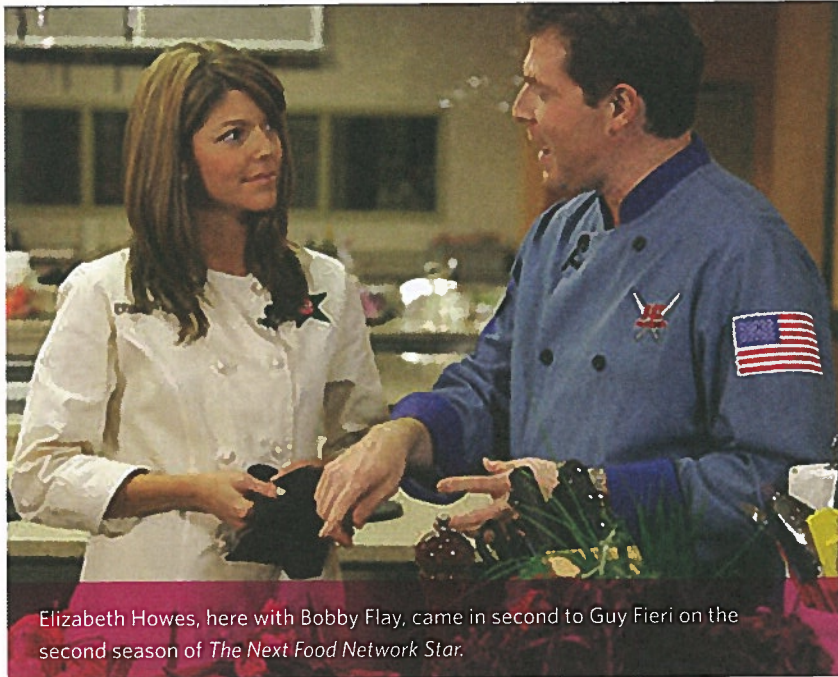


PHOTO COURTESY OF ELIZABETH HOWES

Elizabeth Howes, here with Bobby Flay, came in second to Guy Fieri on the second season of *The Next Food Network Star*.

Bottom Chef?

Reality cooking-show castoffs tell us whether all publicity is really good publicity

by CIA GLOVER

These days Hector Santiago's star shines brighter than ever in the culinary galaxy. Every day he welcomes new customers to his Atlanta restaurant Pura Vida who've come because they saw him on TV. Strangers greet him on the street, offering their support and telling him what a great job he did. You'd think Santiago came away a big winner on a reality cooking show, but he was actually the fourth chef to be eliminated from the most recent season of Bravo's *Top Chef*.

Even after they've been exiled from Hell's Kitchen, asked to pack their knives and go, or simply chopped, chefs who've appeared *continued on page 7*

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on TV's reality cooking shows—and lost—are often just as popular as those who have won.

After the set has been cleared and the production company has moved on to its next competition, is the experience worthwhile for the losing chefs? Do the best chefs always win?

Searching for the Limelight

For most chefs it isn't the promise of big money that lures them to an audition. "I'm always looking for ways to share my food and food knowledge with a broader audience," said Elizabeth Howes, chef and owner of Saffron Lane in the Bay Area, who competed on the second season of *The Next Food Network Star* (eventually losing out to future phenom Guy Fieri). "National TV seemed like a pretty good bet."

Exposure and national recognition are for many the driving forces behind the decision to compete. "I wanted to gain more popularity as a chef and to have my restaurant be at the top of people's list when they come to Atlanta," said Pura Vida's Santiago.

"Reality" vs. Reality

Once a chef makes it to the filming, however, the production isn't always what he or she thought it would be. "The situations you are put in are so unrealistic you can't really treat it as anything but a game," said Alina Eisenhauer, executive chef and owner of Sweet in Worcester, Massachusetts, who competed on Food Network's *Chopped*.

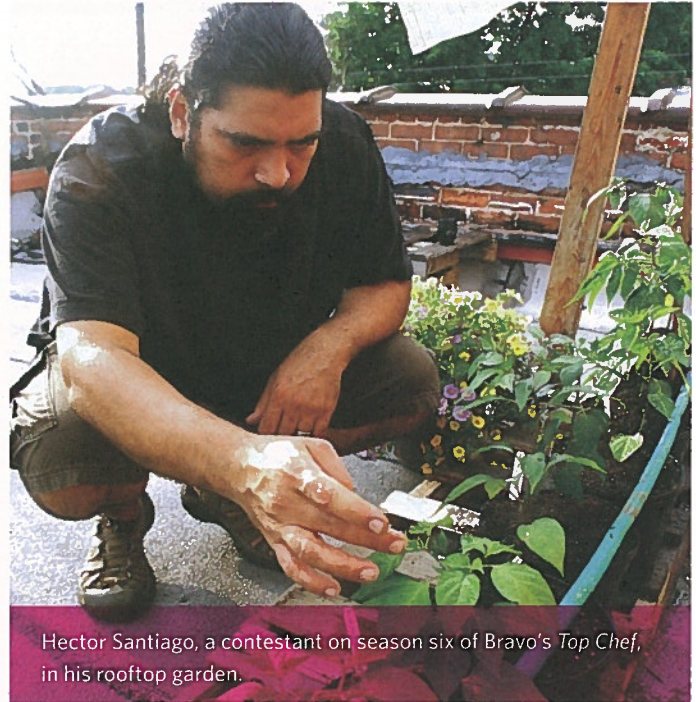
"I was prepared to cook my heart out," Howes explained, "but I wasn't prepared for all the cameras, the crew, the interviews, and surprises at every turn."

The difficulty then becomes learning how to adapt quickly to this strange (and sometimes harsh) environment. Although contestants may arrive with the best intentions, the reality of reality TV kitchens can unnerve even the most seasoned chefs. "I was prepared to cook my heart out," Howes explained, "but I wasn't prepared for all the cameras, the crew, the interviews, and surprises at every turn."

For others like Michael Giletto, executive chef of the Cherry Valley Country Club in New Jersey and Gourmet Butterfly Media and Special Events in NYC, who competed on *Chopped* alongside chef Eisenhauer, it's the isolation that can throw you off your game. "Once taping began, they kept us in separate rooms, walked us with culinary guards to the bathrooms, and would not even let us eat lunch together. Not being able to speak to one another was the most difficult part."

May the Best Chef Win?

With conditions like those, is it possible for this genre of show to accurately reflect the skills of its competitors? Chef Howes isn't so sure. "Well, it's TV. With TV comes the need for drama and plenty of



Hector Santiago, a contestant on season six of Bravo's *Top Chef*, in his rooftop garden.

editing. I don't think many of us had time to even begin to show our true abilities in such a crazed environment."

Chef Giletto, on the other hand, thinks it's up to the chefs. "Editing can be your friend or your enemy," he said. "It all depends on how well you handle yourself on camera. You create your own destiny. If you have the skills, it will show even when they edit things out."

Andy Husbands, chef and owner of Tremont 647 in Boston, competed on the sixth season of *Hell's Kitchen*. Many of his friends and family members were surprised he would subject himself to so much scrutiny and potential embarrassment.

"Most of them asked why I would do such a thing. I think many were inferring that only something negative could come out of it," Husbands explained. "And yes, on many an episode I didn't fare too well. In fact some were downright embarrassing." But he was willing to take the risk for the same reason that persuaded many seasoned chefs before him to step in front of the camera—to introduce himself, and his restaurants, to a new audience.

The Payoff

If you can endure the stressful days of shooting and the embarrassments that may arise from inevitable kitchen blunders—and clever editing—these shows do deliver on the promise of exposure, publicity, and recognition. Chef Santiago sees the benefits all the time. "Even chefs I didn't know contacted me to tell me that they thought I did a great job."

Megan Ketover, a pastry-chef instructor at Midwest Culinary Institute in Cincinnati who competed in the *Food Network Challenge: Cereal Bridges 2*, took away something from the experience that she says she has come to value more than a cash prize or national recognition. "A day on a competition is worth ten days in a kitchen, so it didn't do anything but make me a better chef." ❗