

MEITUS: 'Top Chef' sounds more like 'Survivor'

By Marty Meitus

Tuesday, September 9, 2008

As a newcomer to Bravo's *Top Chef*, I apparently missed the drama of the earlier seasons, but I caught up on some of the inner workings with Marcel Vigneron, one of the top contenders in Season 2.

Vigneron will be in Denver for "A Night in New York," a demonstration and kosher sit-down dinner on Sunday (details below).

He learned about kosher food while working with friend and Season 3 *Top Chef* winner Hung Huynh at Solo.

"It kind of happened by default," says the 28-year-old chef, who was classically trained at the Culinary Art Institute in Hyde Park, N.Y. He's calling from his home in San Francisco. "Hung asked me to help him . . . train the staff and revamp the restaurant.

"I don't think the customers knew kosher food could be that good. We didn't do traditional kosher food." Instead, they followed kosher guidelines in preparing Mediterranean- and Asian-style specialties.

Appearing on the show - and I'd heard this before from another winner - is, in Vigneron's words, "a recipe for going crazy."

The contestants have no cell phones, no television and a lot of hurry up and wait, especially while the judges deliberate.

"It was an interesting experience - pretty difficult at times, pretty fun at times," he says. Cut off from the world at large (which, of course, makes for good TV), "people fight with each other, and the thing about it was, we were told when to go to bed, when to wake up. We were told what to do all the time, which didn't sit well with me - we had people walk us to the bathroom, and I'm pretty independent. The only time we could make our own decisions was when we were in the cooking arena, so that was when I really tried to excel and show myself and express my personality."

Although he won some of the challenges, there were no material prizes, unlike in later seasons.

"At that time, you didn't get anything except to go on (to the next round). Now they get Italian trips. Not that I'm bitter or anything," he says with a laugh.

But give Vigneron an opening and he'll tell you how he really feels about losing to former line cook Ilan Hall, with whom he had an ongoing rivalry.

"I don't have any regrets about how I acted on the show. I'd do it again. It's given me respect in the industry. In the end, a lot of people think I should have won, including myself and some of the guest chefs."

At the demo before Sunday's dinner, "I'm going to showcase a couple of different techniques and some different flavors," he says. "I was going to show a popular thing, like the 64-degree egg. Have you heard of

that?"

Well, no, but I look it up. It's one of those molecular- gastronomy techniques that are all the rage these days.

At the moment, Vigneron is pondering his future and doing a lot of the kind of private gigs like the one in Denver. Given his enthusiasm and confidence, I ask where he thinks he'll be when he's an old man of 38.

"I'll be running a restaurant. I'll be the chef-owner or the executive chef." Either way, he adds, "I will be cooking."

Sunday's dinner and demo are at the kitchen stadium facilities at Builders Appliance Center, 1880 W. Oxford Ave., Englewood. Admission is \$125, with proceeds benefiting EDOS, a Denver Jewish organization. Info: 303-641-7504.

© Rocky Mountain News