

U.S. chefs still seeking recipe to win France's Bocuse d'Or

by Maria C. Hunt

You've had the dream before. The one where you're in the middle of a crowd and everyone is cheering and you're numb from the deafening noise. Even though you know the answer or how to complete the task, things just don't seem to work out right.

At 27, chef Gavin Kaysen of El Bizcocho of San Diego's Rancho Bernardo Inn has lived that dream. In late January, he cooked in the Bocuse d'Or, an international competition staged biennially in Lyon, France, that is so revered in Europe that winning it can make a chef's career.

While thousands of fans screamed, while reporters from around the world stuck microphones in his face, Kaysen and assistant Brandon Rodgers cooked and presented their Norwegian halibut, crab torte and a poulet de Bresse prepared five ways.

Kaysen finished 14th out of 24 chefs.

After some reflection, he is philosophical - and maybe even ready to compete again.

"We didn't lose because we got 14th place, but we have become such better cooks and managers of our lives," Kaysen said. "The experience in itself is awesome. You can't trade that for anything."

AMERICAN DREAM - After returning from the Bocuse d'Or culinary competition in France, chef Gavin Kaysen received a set of boxing gloves signed by many of his colleagues at El Bizcocho in the Rancho Bernardo Inn in San Diego. CNS Photo by Sean M. Haffey.

Still, being part of Bocuse cost him a lot. He missed a year's worth of lunches with his new wife, Linda. He spent \$150,000 on travel to France, a cooking coach and equipment such as a Cleveland Convotherm oven and silver platters custom made in France.

For an American, is it worth putting this kind of cash, sweat and years into a competition that a chef from the U.S. has never won? And does an American chef even have a chance of going to France and winning a competition created by Paul Bocuse, a father of modern French gastronomy?

So far, Kaysen is enjoying his 15 minutes. He appeared on the "Today" show and afterward met celebrated chef Daniel Boulud. Kaysen was featured in a full-page article in Time magazine, and he got to eat at Joel Robuchon's and Alain Ducasse's restaurants in Monaco.

How far the feat will take him professionally remains to be seen. Here in America, even though the 5 1/2-hour competition is televised on The Food Network, it doesn't have nearly the name recognition it does in Europe.

Other Americans who have competed in Bocuse d'Or say the value in pushing your skills to the limit lies on the inside.

"It's about raising your own personal level of commitment to your craft in a sense," said Jeff Jackson, executive chef of San Diego's The Lodge at Torrey Pines. "But the important thing is to keep pushing forward. You have to tip your hat to anyone who gets themselves to that level."

Jackson, who competed in 1987 while cooking at the Park Hyatt in Chicago, had a great mentor in French chef Jean Banchet, who trained under Bocuse. But when Jackson arrived at the competition, he realized he didn't know what to expect.

And then there are the little "mishaps" that can befall American chefs. Jackson told the story of turning to present one of his dishes and finding another contestant's food on his platter.

Kaysen had curious things occur, too. A butler included raw pieces of eggplant and potato - used as an inedible platform under Kaysen's halibut on the display platter - on the tasting plate sent to the judge. Kaysen said he looked up in horror to see a judge trying to eat a raw piece of potato.

Then there was the apprentice - a cooking student from the Bocuse Academy - who was assigned to the American team as a helper. "Our apprentice ate our last two garnishes," Kaysen said. "Barbecued chicken and baked beans."

FLAWED APPROACH?

Still, Kaysen and other past Bocuse chefs believe it's possible for an American to medal or win. (Only the top three finishers win medals.) But they say many things about the way America approaches the competition would have to change first.

Steven Chiappetti, who competed twice - in 1991 and 1997 - said he loved testing his skills on a world level. But he's not sure how much the experience changed his career.

"It's not going to make you money; it's not going to put you on top of the world," Chiappetti said. "People put more stock in 'Iron Chef' than Bocuse d'Or."

Chiappetti, owner of Viand in Chicago, said that in France, past contestants meet with new chefs to go over ideas and presentations. Nothing like that exists in America.

"Every competitor who goes, it's like going for the first time," he said. "With a mentality like that, how can you win?"

Kaysen, too, wishes he had had some of the nation's best culinary talents on his team.

"Imagine sitting down with Boulud, (Thomas) Keller and (Charlie) Trotter and saying, 'Let's throw around ideas,'" Kaysen mused. "You see that kind of camaraderie, and it's hard to fight against that. That's a hard thing to build when nobody from America has ever gone and won."

In Europe, governments consider it a matter of national significance to have a chef place well or win. In France, the contestant is selected about three years in advance, and then he receives government support while preparing. And - quel surprise - a chef from France has won gold or silver in eight of the 11 competitions over the past 20 years.

Kaysen's employer, JC Resorts, which owns the Rancho Bernardo Inn, has been generous with time off and money for equipment. But every Bocuse contestant interviewed cited having to raise money as a key drain of time and energy for Americans.

Chef Tracy O'Grady, who competed in 2001, remembers holding four fundraising dinners and raffles, all while working full time as a sous chef at Kinkead's in Washington, D.C., and practicing.

"I look back at it now, and there was no way I was ever going to win or come close to winning," said O'Grady, who is currently chef-owner of Willow in Arlington, Va. "You can't do that with what I had going on."

She believes an American can win, but she said the likely candidate would come from the kitchen of a Trotter, a Boulud or a Keller, chefs known for their relentless pursuit of perfection.

"America, if they really want to do it, they will find the technician," O'Grady said. "The bottom line is, if you want excellence, you need the best."

Speaking through a publicist, Keller said he has never considered fielding a team from his acclaimed Per Se or The French Laundry to compete in the Bocuse d'Or - and probably won't in the future.

"We gauge our success from the daily goals we set for ourselves and for each other," Keller said. "Those who choose to participate at competition do the same thing, but in a different and larger social scale. I commend them for the inspiration and camaraderie they provide our industry."

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