

Hollywood, Etc.: Colicchio is a triple-crown chef

by Gordon Smith

LOS ANGELES - Tom Colicchio was roasting meat in the kitchen of his new restaurant here recently when a friend text-messaged his cell phone to say that viewers of the "Top Chef" TV series had just voted him the sexiest judge on the show.

CRAFT MASTER - Head judge Tom Colicchio looks on as contestants Sara M. (left) and Casey prepped onions during an episode of 'Top Chef.' 'I'm shocked at how many people watch it,' Colicchio, a respected chef and restaurateur, said of the hit show. CNS Photo courtesy of Glenn Watson / Bravo. Colicchio messaged back: "I'm still roasting meat."

He tells the story with a hearty laugh that seems to acknowledge that a 45-year-old, heavy-set, bald-pated guy who excels at sauce reductions doesn't exactly fit most people's image of a TV heartthrob.

But Colicchio combines soft-spoken confidence with honesty and boy-next-door charm in a way that not only beguiles many TV viewers but has served him well for more than two decades in the high-pressure restaurant business.

A winner of the 2000 James Beard Foundation's award for Best Chef: New York City, he has since become as much a restaurateur as a chef, an orchestrator of an expanding fine-dining empire who trains his staff carefully while keeping a savvy eye on the bottom line.

"There aren't a lot of chefs ... who can cook really well, can lead a kitchen and be a good businessman. It's unusual for all those skills to go together," said Anthony Bourdain, another well-known New York chef and author who has served as a guest judge on "Top Chef."

"And even more unusual," Bourdain added, "is that Tom's a good guy."

Colicchio's latest venture is the restaurant Craft Los Angeles, part of his expanding stable of high-end eateries from New York and Texas to Las Vegas and California. Debuting in July, Craft is a place where Colicchio can show off the wisdom of his years, "stripping down" food, as he puts it, to its essentials while providing diners with the freshest possible ingredients and deft table service.

"At the end of the day, that's what restaurants are all about - making people happy," he said.

It's a focus he has maintained despite the onslaught of fame conferred by his three-year stint on "Top Chef" - a distraction that looms particularly large in Los Angeles, a city where one's image often creates its own reality.

"Several people have come to the restaurant now who said, 'We thought you were just some TV guy. We had no idea you actually ran a restaurant,'" Colicchio said.

"That's why I didn't want to do TV," he added with a pained smile.

Colicchio was executive chef and part owner of New York's Gramercy Tavern - widely considered one of the best restaurants in the country - and was overseeing the ongoing expansion of his own Craft restaurants when Bravo TV producers approached him about being one of three judges on "Top Chef." The reality show features 15 young chefs who compete against each other in a series of cook-offs; one is voted off the show by the judges each week.

Colicchio, preoccupied with his restaurants and wary of the checkered success of reality food TV, turned them down. But the producers were persistent, and he finally relented.

"I'm shocked at how many people watch it," he said, looking relaxed and hip in sunglasses, blue jeans and black leather clogs on the outdoor patio of Craft Los Angeles one recent afternoon. "Top Chef" has averaged nearly 2 million viewers per episode this season, according to Nielsen Media Research.

"I'm sure half the people are tuning in because they're into food, and half are tuning in because they're into reality TV," Colicchio said. "And it's a good show."

Many food experts - whether or not they agree with Colicchio's assessment - say he gives "Top Chef" a needed dose of credibility.

"It's the only cooking show that doesn't make me want to stab my eyeballs out," said venerable New York restaurant consultant Clark Wolf. "The grounding of the show is that Tom ... (projects) authority, knowledge and confidence without being overbearing about it."

Colicchio said he does take the job seriously, partly for the sake of the young chefs involved, whose careers can soar if they perform well.

He also made a concerted effort to raise the overall talent level of the chefs on the show this season by contacting people he knows in the restaurant business and asking them to nominate potential contestants. During the first two seasons, Colicchio said, "you had 15 contestants, and seven or eight could really compete, and the others were just not as good."

Colicchio, a self-taught chef who started out as a teenager making recipes from Jacques Pepin cookbooks, believes he would have fared well on a show such as "Top Chef" when he was a younger man. The weekly

competitions are all about versatility, he said, and his own resume is rife with cooking stints at diverse restaurants, including New York's Rakel, Mondrian and Gramercy Tavern.

These days, however, he has become more of a teacher and businessman. "My heart is in the kitchen," he said, "but I kind of fell into this role." It happened at Mondrian, a restaurant that failed financially because of a poor business plan that was put in place before he arrived, he explained.

"We closed the restaurant after getting great reviews ... and I told myself that wasn't going to happen again."

He made good on his promise at Gramercy Tavern, which opened in 1994 and secured Colicchio's growing reputation as one of the nation's finest chefs. Craft New York came about in 2001, when he was looking to branch out from Gramercy Tavern and opened a restaurant nearby based on the notion of shared platters and simpler food.

(He sold his interest in Gramercy Tavern last year after opening spinoff Craftsteak restaurants in New York, Dallas and Las Vegas. Colicchio's eateries also include 'wichcraft sandwich shops in New York, Las Vegas and San Francisco.)

The Craft restaurants "are about the craft of cooking, not so much the artistry of cooking. It's really about ingredients," he said.

"When you're young, you rely on a lot of bells and whistles - you think you need to load up every dish with a bunch of ingredients. As you get older, you realize you don't have to."

It's an approach that demands the freshest and finest quality meat, seafood and produce: Hawaiian blue prawns, black Mission figs, wagyu beef from Japan. These and other pricey components are highlighted on platters that are shared, steakhouse- or Chinese-restaurant style.

But for Colicchio - ever mindful of the bottom line - running a top restaurant means not only serving exquisite cuisine but going to great lengths to train his staff. At Craft Los Angeles, he even took a recent turn washing dishes to demonstrate how he wants things done.

Prospective waiters and waitresses are put through a rigorous, six-day training regimen, during which they spend a series of shifts "trailing" a bartender, a chef and other members of the staff, and then write up reports on what they have observed and learned. Those who fail to earn a passing grade on one of their reports don't get hired.

The screening doesn't stop there. Colicchio says he also winnows out applicants who can't provide hospitality as well as service.

"Service and hospitality are two different things. I've been to plenty of restaurants where the service is absolutely correct, but (the wait staff) isn't smiling, no one's engaging, no one's interacting. That's not hospitality," he said.

"We always say we can teach you to wait tables, open wine and pour wine, but we can't teach you to make people happy ... So that's something we always look for, someone that has that desire to please people."

Wolf, the restaurant consultant, said Colicchio's focus on hiring and training at his Craft restaurants has paid off with friendly yet expert service that other top restaurants often don't achieve.

"Unannounced, I sat at the bar in Craftsteak Las Vegas (recently), and the bartender, without being preachy, knew every leaf of every dish," Wolf said.

Colicchio is "sort of a pioneer of fine dining that isn't too stuffy - pain-free fine dining," Bourdain quipped.

His restaurants, Bourdain added, "are kind of like him. I think he's one of the most important chefs in the country, but he's not full of himself at all."

Brimming with confidence, certainly; highly competitive, no doubt; but somehow not self-important. Here is Colicchio matter-of-factly describing what it takes to successfully lead the kitchen of a major restaurant:

"You have to be a talented cook, but a chef is someone who really rises above, who can put together menus, organize the kitchen and organize the food ...

"You can be the best cook in the world, but it's not about that one dish. It's about a body of work that you can put into production, and produce it consistently, every single time, for 200 people a night."

Spoken like a top chef. Sound bites from Tom Colicchio

On whether the personality clashes among contestants on "Top Chef" are orchestrated by the show's producers:

"No, not at all. (But) you've got 15 contestants who are forced to live with each other (in a hotel penthouse this season). They don't know each other, they're not allowed phones, they're not allowed to watch TV, they're

not allowed contact with the outside world at all. They're not allowed Internet access, they're not allowed money or credit cards, they cannot go out unsupervised. So it becomes sort of a real social experiment ... Some people get upset and some people don't, and you see it (on the show), but it's not manufactured."

On the difference between fresh produce in California and on the East Coast:

"The produce here is just amazing. Especially the stone fruit. We have great farmers markets in New York, but it's not as varied as this. Here, when it's strawberry season, there's five different (types of) strawberries, and each one is a little different.

"The other thing is, here the season doesn't end. In New York, in the winter, you have potatoes and apples. And more apples. Maybe onions."

On whether he does the cooking at Craft Los Angeles:

"Most chefs don't cook. It's a little secret. We're coordinating everything. I've got six, seven, eight stations (in the kitchen) to coordinate."

Hollywood, Etc.: Colicchio is a triple-crown chef by Gordon Smith