

IN THE KITCHEN WITH

“Top Chef: Las Vegas” Competitor **Ron Duprat**

By Leah Spellman Craig



RON DUPRAT

Executive Chef
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WHEN “TOP CHEF: LAS VEGAS” premiered Aug. 19, 2.6 million Americans tuned in to see which chefs would be cooking their way through quickfire tests and elimination challenges for a chance at \$125,000 and the renowned title of “Top Chef,” among other prizes. Ron Duprat, a native of Haiti who was classically trained at College Aimee Cesaire and La Varenne Ecole de Cuisine, was one of the lucky 17 “chef’testants” along for the ride.

After cooking for renowned guest judges—including Wolfgang Puck, Todd English, Daniel Boulud and Michelle Bernstein—and in a variety of unique scenarios in Las Vegas—cooking for the Thunderbirds at Nellis Air Force Base, for cowboys at a campsite and for magicians Penn and Teller—Duprat was sent home at the end of episode six when his paella did not meet the judges’ standards. The jovial 40-year-old executive chef may not have returned to Florida with the prize money, but he did return to a AAA-four-diamond establishment where he really is “top chef.” The American Culinary Federation caught up with Duprat after his memorable farewell to hear about his career, his passions and his plans for the future.

What is your average day like at the Hollywood Beach Marriott? I greet my staff and ensure everyone’s well-being and needs pertaining to work. I check the day’s business and walk through the hotel’s outlets to see that everything is up to par. Then, I check all incoming food products to ensure they are top quality. I hold a kitchen meeting to discuss daily specials and business information. I attend a managers’ meeting and banquet meeting. I walk the kitchen line to make sure that all items look and taste good, and are ready to be served to guests. Then, I meet and mingle with guests in the restaurant. Once everybody has eaten, I do a daily food order with the purchasing steward. Then, I ensure that the p.m. crew is set up for the evening. Finally, I hand responsibilities over to the p.m. sous chef and discuss the day’s events.

How would you describe yourself? Happy-go-lucky. I like to have fun, but when it is time to get in the kitchen, it’s all about professionalism and business.

What do you enjoy doing when you are not working? I enjoy being involved in the community, doing lots of charity work and helping new chefs grow.

Your life in Haiti and your grandmother greatly influenced who you are today. What is one of your most distinct childhood memories? Some of my earliest memories are of cooking alongside my grandmother in Haiti. After the journey to the United States, I remember cooking the fish we caught to survive. We would cook fresh produce from my father's gardens and simmer sauces and seasonal herbs. Those smells can still conjure up memories of me standing by my grandmother as we worked in the kitchen together.

The unique tastes, smells and feelings created with my grandmother cannot be taught in a sterile classroom; they must be learned by immersion. It comes with the territory, as food is not only designed to nourish us, but to serve as lifelong memories. Cooking with her was inspirational. I remember the smells and aromas of the fresh ingredients she used, and shopping for fresh vegetables in the lively street markets or taking vegetables from her backyard.

You moved to Miami when you were 16. Describe what it was like acclimating to the culture in the U.S. How long was it before you realized cooking would be your career? Getting acclimated to the States was fun. I saw so many new things, new ingredients and products that were not available to me in Haiti. I soon realized that my grandma's cooking lessons were about to help me start a career here. At first, it was survival, but later, it turned into a passion. Obviously, walking into the big supermarkets with every type of ingredient was a pleasant eye-opener. I believe if you work hard in this country, you will eventually be rewarded.

Your cooking has been described as a fusion of Caribbean, French and Asian cuisines. Describe how this came to be your signature. My cooking includes influences from my background. Being born in Haiti in the Caribbean, I have been exposed to many tropical fruits, spices, not to mention the beautiful bounty of fish that surrounds my homeland. The French connection comes from France's relationship to Haiti. The French style of cooking is very much ingrained in me. The fusion part of the puzzle comes from being in the States and mixing with so many other cultural influences. I am primarily interested in Asian cuisine. I am drawn to the simplicity of the cooking techniques and its pronounced flavor profiles.

What are some of your favorite dishes to make? I love to make boniato-crusted grouper/leek stew with Rhum Barbancourt sauce; jumbo scallops, spinach and cannellini beans; slow-roasted beef short ribs in a roasted-shallot demi-glace; stuffed free-range chicken breast with foie gras; and oxtail ravioli with chanterelles, red wine sauce and pecorino Romano.

You have been a member of the American Culinary Federation since 1997. How has your involvement in this organization, and others, influenced you as a chef? ACF has allowed me to come together with fellow professionals from around the food-and-beverage world, to network and enjoy other chefs' experiences. Also, it has helped me keep up with the latest trends and ever-evolving opportunities that are available to the next generation of culinarians.

You have worked with many well-known chefs throughout your career. Who has influenced you the most? My biggest influences include Randall Cox and Adam Savage, a fellow Ocean Properties chef at the Delray Beach Marriott, Delray Beach, Fla.

Aside from your position at the Marriott, what do you have planned for the future? Might there be a cookbook in the works? Yes, there's plenty to come! I have a lot of projects in the works for the future... maybe some new projects with Ocean Properties, Ltd. I also hope to produce some cooking classes and monthly wine dinners at the Hollywood Beach Marriott. My goal is to continue my career within the Ocean Properties family.



COOKING TIPS FOR CHEFS

Cook with your heart and with passion, making each meal the best it can be. Focus on your weak points to continue improving.

—Ron Duprat