

NH Foodbank SteelChef Competition for Charity

March 11th, 2019 was one of the craziest days of my life. I was blessed to have been able to cook in a competition to help raise money for the NH Food Bank in Manchester, New Hampshire. Three other chef competitors and I went head-to-head to attempt to win the elusive Knife Trophy and to raise money to feed the hungry in front of almost six hundred people.

This was the 4th annual Steel Chef Challenge and the static of anticipation filled the air.

The Steel Chef Challenge is like a hybrid of the Iron Chef and Chopped contests created by the Food Network. On Iron Chef, the chef contestants have one hour to create four dishes with a secret ingredient. On Chopped, the chefs have to create something totally random with a mystery basket of ingredients that generally don't go together in only twenty minutes. Steel Chef, however, offers up a couple proteins and a pantry of ingredients but, at the last moment, the MC, this year it was Alex Guarnaschelli from the Food Network, throws a bone in the mix and offers up a couple odd ingredients that would not normally go with the dish. It's an amazing draw for hundreds of charitable people that want to make a difference in their community.

On the day I arrived at the Double Tree Hotel in Manchester, New Hampshire, it felt like I was about to hop on one of those rickety carnival rides. Though I knew it was going to be fun, I didn't know what I got myself into. There were cameras, news anchors and a celebrity chef taking pictures and signing cookbooks. People were clicking selfies with their heroes and strangers were saying hello from every direction.

The VIP room they had setup for us was incredibly honorable. From local restaurant chefs and owners to past contestants and Steel Chef winners, it was a "who's who" of the areas chef's and culinarians.

As my fellow contestants trickled in, we talked shop for a bit with nervous tones, trying to figure each other out. The hundreds of people who were invited were flowing in, waving and smiling at us like we were some sort of royalty. It was a humbling experience and something I won't soon forget.

There were billboards with our headshots on it, creepily staring at me as a life-sized spectacle. Cameras filming candid moments of people eating and laughing as the evening progressed. For me, I felt like I was in some sort of dream-state, about to wake up at any moment. I could only imagine how the other three chef contestants must have been feeling.

I discovered that night, the indescribable level of preparation it took the large team of professionals to get to this moment. Of course, since this was a food-driven event, they needed to acquire some food. Being a fund raiser, it was imperative for them to get as many items donated as possible. With deep roots within the community, the New Hampshire Food Bank has a long list of partnerships and willing guarantor's ready to help. With local seafood vendors like Seaport Fish out of Portsmouth, New Hampshire to regional merchants like Cabot Creamery out of Vermont, it was a privilege to see how many companies were willing to give to this great cause. There were vendors that offered smoked meats from North Country Smokehouse and Lef Farms, a hydroponic greens farm offering up lettuces. It just shows that with a community as strong as this one, anything is possible.

Yes, the food and small ware donations were very important, but those donating their precious time to this cause was a great experience to witness. Chefs and culinarians of all levels of experience, from all over New England were in attendance. Most offered assistance in abundant ways; from chopping onions to searing beef to wiping the rims of the plates before service. Each little thing added up to the final event.

We casually walked around the VIP room, enjoying charcuterie and other snacks offered up by Steel Chef Challenge winners and contestants from the last three years. The New Hampshire chefs included Even Hennessey from Stages at One Washington in Dover, Julie Cutting from Cure Restaurant in Portsmouth, Bryan Leary from The Inn at Pleasant Lake in New London, Jason Seavey from Glendale Dining Services in Laconia and Edwin Santana from Tuscan Brands in Salem. I have had the pleasure and honor to have met all of these chefs at one time or another as we attend similar events. Bumping into these fellows reminds me how driven we are when it comes to our craft. To us, this is more than just a hobby, this is our lives.

Some great memories were made that week as the chefs behind the scenes were making all this happen. Out back in the hotel's kitchen, more than 1800 plates were being assembled. With beautiful, artisanal salads painstakingly plated to magnificent entrees and striking desserts, the controlled chaos was a sight to see. Chef Jayson McCarter, one of the many cogs making this event such a success, shared with me the many hours of preparation leading up to that day. He described the Steel Chef Competition day as a lesson in "Quiet Chaos." His glow of pride as he described the many challenges that had to be overcome in order to have the event be a success. There are so many things that went on that we will never be able to see or understand; from rounding up sponsors, recruiting volunteer culinary professionals to getting the food to arrive at the venue and much more. None of these things would be possible without a strong leader and the many motivated hands.

The clock drew closer and closer to show time and the four of us were feeling a little nervous. They lead us to the back of the stage and hooked us up with headset mics and preliminary instructions. Words of encouragement were given, hands were shaken and backs were patted as the minutes closed in. I got to meet Iron Chef Alex Guarnaschelli in person, which was pretty amazing. As we were lining up waiting to get on stage, there were introductory videos of us playing on huge screens over the audience. I could hear my voice on the speakers as my video played. I was grinning as I remembered the day where the Comcast cameraman met me at work for filming. It was like a small taste of what it must be to be on TV, which has been a personal dream of mine for many years.

We walked up on stage, greeted with thunderous applause and admirable hooting. Under the spotlights, I could see many familiar faces looking up at us with giddy expectancy. Cell phones were capturing and sharing moments, cameras were pointed towards us as we familiarized ourselves with our competition stations. As I placed me knife-roll on the table, I took a minute to get my game plan into check. I asked myself a few questions and treated the moment like I was getting ready to cook for friends and family, breathing in a prayer and mentally walking through the nerves. Crocks full of useful utensils, sauté pans stacked neatly and two cutting boards framed by side towels and two induction cookers, I was ready to make it happen.

Moments later, our famous Chef MC announced the mystery ingredients. With a little help from the audience, she chose venison loin from Bonnie Brae Farms in Plymouth, New Hampshire and fresh scallops in the shells from NH Fish Mongers from Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Beautiful and fresh, I

was so excited to get started! But, let's not forget the odd secret ingredients I mentioned earlier. Veiled under a red linen napkin were an interesting assortment of arbitrary food items. Black licorice, canned sardines in mustard and Doritos were among them as we all gasped with concern. Luckily, the audience helped choose Doritos and Sardines in Mustard. I was relieved, to say the least. Trying to come up with something tasty with black licorice would have been a challenge for anyone.

The clock started and we were off! Tunnel vision and focus made those 20 minutes fly by. Next thing I know, I am looking down at seared, butter basted venison loin and scallops, gnocchi with a mustard sardine alfredo sauce that I thickened with Doritos. There were a couple mishaps, however, when I nicked my index finger on a razor sharp scallop shell and there was no butter at any of our stations. Luckily, with a quick backup crew waiting to assist, I got my Band-Aid and the butter needed. As I dabbed the sweat from my forehead, we awaited judgement.

The judgement panel were Chef Michael Buckely, Chef-Owner, Michael Timothy's Dining Group, Chef Tony Bomba, 2017 Steel Chef winner and Executive Chef of The Common Man's specialty restaurants in Meredith, and Erin Fehlau WMUR-TV Morning News Anchor & Host of NH Chronicle. All three seemed to be having the time of their lives and it was awesome to have them eat my food.

Chef Chris Viaud from Greenleaf restaurant in Milford, New Hampshire and Chef Nick Provencher from Birch on Elm in Manchester, New Hampshire were just amazing people to hang out with and amazing people. The well-deserved winner, George K. Bezanson from Earth's Harvest Kitchen & Juicery in Dover, New Hampshire was such a nice guy. Everyone of my fellow contestants were humble and food-centric like few others. Competing with them was just an amazing experience that will go into some of my fondest memories. It showed that we are all lifers in this crazy industry. Our commitment to being the best and feeding people was obvious to each of us. I very much look forward to eating at their restaurants!

As the result of this colossal undertaking, the Steel Chef Challenge helped raise almost \$500, 000 dollars towards feeding the hungry. To me, giving back to our community is something that we should all do on a regular basis. You don't have to be a chef to feed the less fortunate or to be a part of helping the hungry, just being willing to put the time in can change someone's life for the better.