

The second season of Bravo's all-pro version of "Top Chef" is stacked with local talent

By Erin Brereton

Chicago chefs represent! The cast of culinary competitors on Season 2 of "Top Chef Masters," premiering at 10 p.m. Wednesday on Bravo, includes three big names on the local restaurant scene: Rick Tramonto, Graham Elliot Bowles and Tony Mantuano. It's the first appearance for Tramonto and Mantuano and the second for Bowles, one of a handful of chefs returning this season for another shot at the title.

In addition to slicing, dicing and dueling for the title of Top Chef Master, they also will battle for a \$100,000 donation to a charity of their choice. And they'll be doing it all in the shadow of Rick Bayless, who did our city (and his charity, the Frontera Farmer Foundation) proud with a Season 1 win.

We caught up with the three Chicago-based contenders to find out about their cooking lives here in town and why they could be the next Top Chef Master.



MEET THE MASTERS



1 Rick Tramonto

Executive chef/partner, Tru (676 N. St. Clair St.); Cullinary director, Tramonto's Steak & Seafood, RT Sushi Bar, Osteria

Playing for: Feed the Children

First episode appearance: April 28

Create your own "Top Chef" challenge in Chicago. Where would it be and who would compete?

It would be at Paulina Meat Market, and I would invite Chris Pandel from the Bristol, Jared Van Camp from Old Town Social and Tim Graham, my close friend and chef at Brasserie Jo.

You cook for some big names on the show. Who's the highest-profile person you've cooked for in your restaurant?

Oprah. We've been blessed at Tru; I've cooked for three U.S. presidents, Michael Jordan, Mick Jagger. ... Robin Williams [once] came in. There was one table left in the dining room. He grabbed a bunch of desserts and went out with the waiter, put on his best French accent and started to describe the desserts—the people thought they were getting punked.

What three staples do you always have in your home fridge?

Definitely Vitamin Water—that's my chug—and any kind of hot sauce [or] spicy salsa and cottage cheese.

What about classic Chicago foods?

Any favorites?

I've been an Italian beef guy since the day I got to Chicago 22 years ago. Italian beef at Mr. Beef or Al's or Portillo's—I wouldn't turn any of those down.

What's your secret weapon on the show?

Just my own creativity and spirit of how I see food as a painting or as art—the playfulness of my stuff.

2 Graham Elliot Bowles

Chef/owner, Graham Elliot (217 W. Huron St.), Grahamwich (opening in June, 615 N. State St.)

Top Chef charity: American Heart Association

First episode appearance: April 21

Create your own "Top Chef" challenge in Chicago. Where would it be and who would compete?

I'd do a challenge at Wrigley Field and invite Paul Kahan [The Publican, Blackbird, AVEC, Big Star] and Cary Taylor [The Southern]—they are both are fans of the game.

Who's the highest-profile person you've cooked for in your restaurant?

Probably President Obama. He was gracious, laid-back and ordered a tasting menu, which I thought was awesome, seeing as most of the other politicians seem to order well-done steak with ketchup on the side.

If you could have dinner with three other celeb chefs, who would they be? Where would you eat?

It'd be cool to dine with Wylie Dufresne [wd-50 in New York], Grant Achatz [Alinea] and Alex Stupak [pastry chef, wd-50] at David Kinch's Manresa [in Los Gatos, Calif.].

What three things are always in your home fridge?

Soy sauce, Belgian beer, leftover takeout.

This is your second season competing on "Top Chef Masters." What's your weapon this time around?

My sense of humor.

3 Tony Mantuano

Chef/partner, Spiaggia (980 N. Michigan Ave.), Terzo Piano (159 E. Monroe St.)

Top Chef charity: Feeding America

First episode appearance: Wednesday

If you held a Chicago "Top Chef" challenge, who'd get an invite—and where would it be?

Outside—somewhere like Oak Street Beach or on the piazza of Terzo Piano. You could only cook with fire. I would have grills and pizza ovens constructed and invite chefs like Paul Kahan, Jimmy Bannos [Heaven on Seven, The Purple Pig], Takashi Yagahashi [Takashi], John Hogan [Tavern at the Park], Sarah Gruenberg [executive chef, Spiaggia] and Meg Collieran [Sahs] [chef di cucina, Terzo Piano].

Who are the highest-profile people you've cooked for in your restaurant ... and were you star-struck?

Barack and Michelle Obama—[from] before he was a U.S. senator all the way through the dinner they had at Spiaggia to celebrate [his election as president]. They are so down to earth. I was a little star-struck cooking for Paul McCartney—until I went to his table. He was also easy to talk to, and we ended up talking about our fave restaurants in London.

What three things are always in your home fridge?

Italian sparkling wine, beer and pecorino romano cheese. We finish every pasta dish at home with pecorino romano.

What was the first phenomenal Chicago-style food you ever sampled?

A Chicago-style hot dog at Wrigley Field. Wrigley and a hot dog: What's more Chicago than that?

What's going to help you win "Top Chef Masters"?

My love and passion for Italian cooking. You are who you are, and I will try to play to my strengths. You'll never see me cooking Asian fusion.