

and the
winner
is . . .



by Abby Luby

PHOTOS BY SHANNON MCFARLAND

IT WAS THE BIG DAY. The day that Hudson Valley chef Peter Kelly would face off with celebrity Iron Chef Bobby Flay. After months of drilling for TV Food Network's Iron Chef America, Kelly and his team (chef Kathy Egan, of Xaviars, and Kelly's brother, chef James Kelly, of Restaurant X), were primed for the high-tension cook-off in Kitchen Stadium at Food Network studios in Manhattan.

This was not only a battle of cooking finesse under the pressure of hot studio lights, in-your-face cameras and the palettes of three critical judges, this was a cultural combat. Flay, a national celebrity, cooks with powerful, bold, Tex-Mex flavors; Kelly (who refers to himself as a humble, regional chef) uses more subtle, nuanced dishes.

But the deck seemed stacked against Kelly from the start. Not only was he the visiting team on Flay's home turf, but the secret ingredient was beef, to be cooked on the grill—two of Flay's specialties. Flay's reputation is built on grill cooking (he's authored about five books on the subject and runs a half dozen steakhouse restaurants), so Kelly had to be creative and come up with diverse dishes not in Flay's repertoire.

Kelly's team practiced five different menus even though only four were needed for the battle. Looking back on the day as in a dream, Kelly says "I utilized the grill a little differently—it actually became one of the ingredients. We used the smoke and the grilling flavor as a seasoning to our dishes rather than letting the grill dominate the food."

Cooking four dishes in one hour to be judged on the spot was like writing orchestral music with the symphony standing by at Carnegie Hall. Supporting Kelly in the stands were family and friends. "They were very boisterous," he said somewhat abashedly. "They were even chanting at one point and egging me on. They were there for me."

As the cooking got underway the chefs moved at a frantic pace. "It's not about the temperature in the kitchen, it's your own personal body temperature," Kelly says. "You're really pumped up for it."

Nerve racking was the bunch of roving cameras zooming in on chefs' sweat-borne faces and every chop, dice and mix. "I had the cameras right in my face often—and there were a lot of cameras," Kelly recalls. "You're constantly stepping over wires and trying not to fall down while you're running around like crazy. But they did their best to stay out of our way."

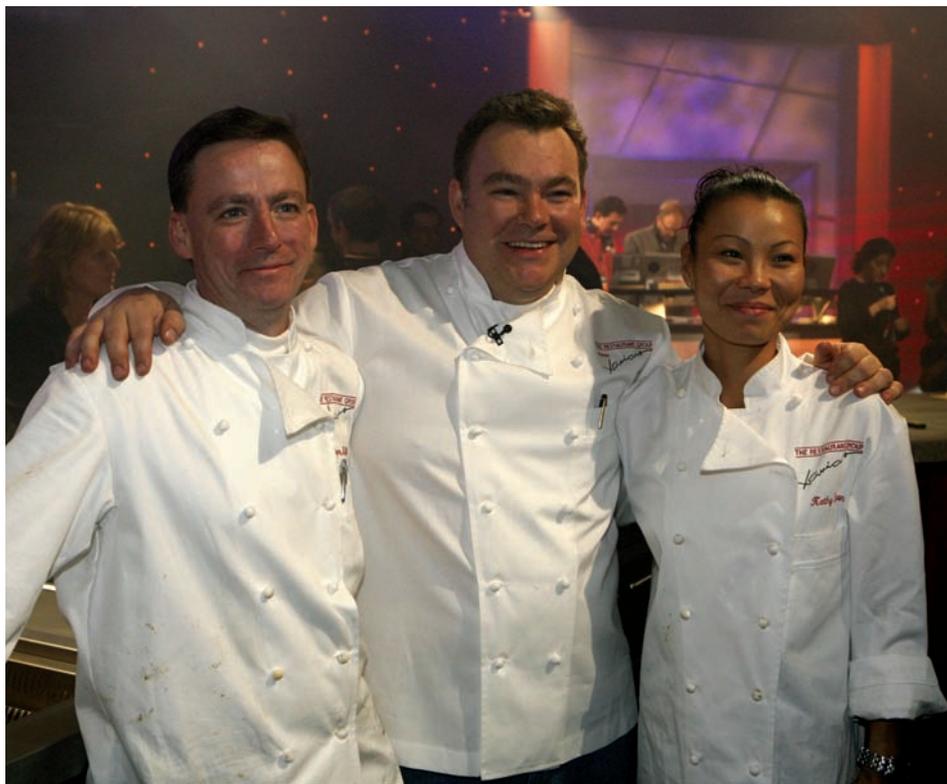
To make things worse, the rehearsals had to be at one of the busiest times of the year for Hudson Valley chefs—the height of fall foliage. Kelly, Egan and James Kelly would jump from the crazed weekend kitchens right into Iron Chef?? It's often said that bad rehearsals make for good performances, but Kelly wasn't convinced of that. Their last rehearsal at Kitchen Stadium turned out to be a disaster.

"We wanted a trial run at 10 a.m. but didn't get started until 2 p.m.," says Kelly, shuddering as he looked back at the day's spate of calamities. "It went so badly. We became angry and frustrated—we were caught in a situation. We regrouped, got over it and thought

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about how we worked together as a team. We came up with a game plan," Kelly says. "Maybe if we had a great rehearsal we might not have done as well as we did."

Kelly and his team vowed to be laid back and to keep their cool, especially if there were any mishaps. The real test came with a serious casualty—James snipped a tip of his finger off about five minutes into the battle. "It was a nice slice off of his little finger and it wouldn't stop bleeding," says Kelly. "We had to get him bandaged up quickly and he continued to cook. We couldn't have finished without him. He was the star."





There were also a few mishaps on Flay's side of the kitchen, Kelly notes. "I was told that Flay had problems with the temperature of his grill. We were very careful with the temperature on our grill ovens and tried to be very precise. We had hot points, low points and medium points for different items."

Kelly kept focused on his goal – to get everything on the plate that was called for. He timed every single item down to the second. "Twenty minutes into the show we had to know how far we should be on the clock," he said.

Along with the main menus, Kelly and Flay had to pair dressings and side dishes, sometimes choosing from hundreds of ingredients. In keeping with Kelly's subtle but distinct approach, his "Surf & Turf" dish used a butter-milk based dressing with raffia tea, star anise and Kaffir lime. "The tea is very fragrant and with the toasted star anise, the Kaffir Lime leaf had a perfuming quality to it," explained Kelly.

Kelly was allowed to bring some tools with him from his own kitchens. "I brought a micro planer which is a long grater that grates very, very fine," says Kelly. "I took Chorizo, a Portuguese sausage, and I froze it solid. I used a micro planner to grate the Chorizo so it was like a dust over a salad made of smoked marble potato and lobster."

Finely grated Buddha Hand (a hand-shaped yellow Asian citrus) was also finely grated into a dressing used for the Carpaccio beef dish. "We grated Buddha Hand with garlic and ouzo. It was spicy, tart, and it had a little bit of sweet chile sauce in it as well," says Kelly. "It had an explosion of flavors."

Throughout the battle Kelly kept focused on what he was doing without watching Flay. Any built in animosity usually associated with this high-pressure contest was mostly pushed aside. "Bobby was very gracious and my son Dylan, who is ten years old, was dying to get his autograph," says

Kelly. "Dylan chased him down for that. Bobby couldn't have been nicer to him."

Flay and Kelly tossed a coin to see who would serve the judges first. Flay won and chose to serve the judges after Kelly. "If you're the last one to present to the judges it means you're in the better position," surmises Kelly. But Kelly was only too happy to go first. "My food was going to be a more subtle interpretation of the main ingredient," he says. "I was afraid if I went second and Bobby had all these big bold flavors, the judges wouldn't have the same appreciation for my food. Their palette could be a little bit burnt or they could be suffering from palette fatigue."

The judging process was brutal. When Kelly presented his dishes to the judges, Flay was peering over Kelly's shoulder. "That was a little bit uncomfortable," Kelly says.

After tasting one dish, one of the judges told Kelly "I don't think a cowboy would eat this."

"I thought it wasn't a fair comment," says Kelly, who quickly told the judge, "The issue really isn't what a cowboy might make for himself, it's how a chef would prepare a cowboy steak."

Kelly brought his own plate settings to gain on presentation points:

- Trio of Rib Eye: Steak & Mushrooms, Mushroom Custard with minced grilled Rib Eye & Mushroom
- Air Crepe of Porcini Mushrooms with Grilled Rib eye Cap, a steak and mushroom dish served three different ways rendered the judges silent.

"I have never seen those judges so quiet. It was great," Kelly gleams. "The comments started coming and I was very happy with that dish."

But the momentary euphoria was fleeting. As judges first tasted one of Flay's dishes, Kelly's heart fell. "I heard one of the judges say 'Oh my god. This is exactly why I love to go to Bobby's restaurants.' I thought 'it's over. There's no way we could win.' There was not one bad comment about Flay's dishes." Kelly walked off the set to regain his composure.

Still, Kelly believed his presentation, and dish compositions were deftly crafted and expertly thought out.

And, as it happened, so did the judges.

When all was said and done, Peter Kelly was declared the winner of "Iron Chef America."

"I'm amazed, really," says Kelly. "I'm an unknown and to win over Bobby Flay, on his own terms with his own ingredients and his specialty—it's just great."

Kelly is now the first Hudson Valley chef to claim victory over a nationally known chef known to battle and win against hundreds of American chefs on the Food TV Network. "In the end, point wise, we had a very strong line up," says Kelly. "And in the end, it all worked out. It was quite a whirlwind."