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Bravo's New Top Chef Tells All

How did Ilan Hall, the 24-year-old with the Tintin 'do, beat out 14 other contestants to become *Top Chef* on the Bravo reality show? And what's he planning to do with the \$100,000 he won? Adam Sachs finds out.

By Adam Sachs

What did I learn watching the second season of Bravo's hit reality show *Top Chef*? I learned that cooking is an extreme sport. And that competing in this full-contact cook-off requires repeating the phrase "flavor profiles" as often as possible. I understood the full power of host Padma Lakshmi: Not only is she mesmerizingly beautiful, but she also has a way of hypnotizing contestants by speaking very... very... slowly. And I discerned that the long, hard road to culinary dominance begins with a dish made from poached snails, peanuts and American cheese.

That the 24-year-old Ilan Hall was able to turn those odd-couple ingredients into appetizing escargots with cheese sauce probably should have been a sign that he was destined to win the Top Chef title. The series pitted contestants against each other in dozens of stressful and often wacky cooking challenges; in one episode, for instance, the chefs were asked to turn vending-machine snacks into elegant amuse bouches. Much backstabbing and many emotional meltdowns, ruthless expulsions and dramatically scored moments of truth ensued throughout the episodes—along with some impressive cooking under pressure. Ilan's suave handling of the cheese and snails won him the first episode's QuickFire Challenge.

I met up with Ilan to see what he'd learned about cooking and about the alternate reality of reality TV, and to find out what kind of restaurant career he envisions. We sat at the hot, smoky counter at Yakitori Taisho, a cramped Japanese place in Manhattan's East Village. Ilan stops in regularly for skewers of quail eggs and raw octopus with wasabi. "What I love about this place is the food is great and it looks like a dive bar," Ilan said. We

drank beer and ate skewers of chicken skin ("Extra crispy," Ilan requested) and tried grilled pig's feet and french fries with *mentaiko* (spicy fish roe) mayo.

What, I asked Ilan, could he take from a place like this and re-create in his own restaurant? "There's no barrier between the customers and the kitchen," he said. "Everything is in front of you and the food is honest. You order grilled pig's feet and it's grilled pig's feet." We sat watching the cooks work in a kitchen covered from wall to ceiling with tinfoil, and neither of us could have been happier to be away from the pretensions of fine dining, far from foie gras, let alone a fork.

Ilan clearly has a passion for food, but he doesn't lecture his peers about molecular gastronomy, as Marcel Vigneron, his archrival on the show, tends to do. (That's not the only difference between the two. It's TV, so hair is important: Ilan has a Tintin-ish spike, whereas Marcel's feral 'do rises like the flames from Lady Liberty's torch.) Ilan has a deadpan sense of humor and an unfussy style behind the stove. That and a wanderer's curiosity about food and the world.

When Ilan was growing up on Long Island, his father, a Scotsman with an electronics-importing business, was the family cook. His repertoire was mostly straightforward Mediterranean—olive oil, no butter, lots of grilled fish—and he passed along his respect for fresh ingredients to Ilan. Ilan's Israeli mother, an art director for the Long Island newspaper *Newsday*, stayed out of the kitchen but encouraged her son's interest in food.

In high school, Ilan had a job at a seafood store and learned how to work with various types of fish. But observing the lifestyle of a cousin who worked in restaurants around the world sealed the deal: "My cousin was living this nomadic life, hanging out in the south of France, cooking at a Terence Conran place in London. Every time I'd see him, he'd have a better-looking girlfriend." With the blessings of his parents and teachers, Ilan spent the last semester of high school studying cooking and staging at a restaurant in Florence. After that, it was off to the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), followed by more travel and a stint at *Top Chef* judge Tom Colicchio's *Craft* restaurant, where he clashed with chef de cuisine Damon Wise and got fired. "I'm good friends with him now. He's apologized. I was young and obnoxious," Ilan said.

When he applied to be a *Top Chef* contestant, Ilan was working as a line cook at Casa Mono, the Mario Batali-funded Spanish spot in Manhattan, and living in a 300-square-foot studio. "I've cooked in my apartment only twice," Ilan said. "Once for a party with my grandmother and once for the *Top Chef* audition tape. I made leftover ramen noodles with Kewpie mayonnaise because they were the only things I had in the house."

Now he's won \$100,000 in seed money and a fully loaded Sears Kenmore kitchen (where he'll put it is anyone's guess), and Ilan's wanderlust is back. He's quit his day job and plans to travel to the Far East and to Spain—Seville, Costa Brava, San Sebastián—and spend his time eating and cooking. "I could tell you I'd like to do a stage at El Bulli," he said. "But the truth is if I could cook anywhere, it would be at a place called Chez Eugénie on the beach in Guadeloupe. I went with my family when I was 10. The husband is the fisherman. The wife cooks the fish. It's simple and perfect."

One of Ilan's long-range plans is to open a small restaurant serving Spanish tapas-style dishes with Asian influences—like the pan-fried fideo cakes studded with chorizo and shrimp, a riff on the grilled rice cakes at Yakitori Taisho. "I love plancha cooking, and I love wok cooking for the same reason—they're quick and fresh," Ilan said. "Eventually, I'd like to have two restaurants. One will be the tapas-inspired place, which will always be packed and make me money. Then I can open something tiny and elegant. With seven seats. Next door."

Ilan believes that too many expensive restaurants operate without a soul. "The seasoning can be right, the preparation fine, but a robot could have made the food. It's cafeteria food for wealthy people." Downtown dives aren't the only places that move him, though. "I love *Per Se*, too," he said about the haute New York City restaurant. "The food there is very, very elegant but still very simple. It doesn't set your tongue on fire and then slap you in the face like Wylie Dufresne's does at *WD-50*—which I love also, don't get me wrong. But sometimes that kind of thing is more about an experience than about a piece of fish."

One of the lessons Ilan learned on *Top Chef* is the importance of getting people to do what you want them to do in a positive way: "You encourage them and make them want to work with you and cook great food, which is the goal of any restaurant." He keeps relationships cordial in the kitchen, but on the show he wasn't afraid to engage the enemy. He quickly identified a few cast members as dangerous competition: Cliff Crooks and Sam Talbot, two likable New York-based chefs with impressive chops; and Elia Aboumrad, a 23-year-old from Mexico City who trained with Joël Robuchon and who, Ilan said, had the best pure talent of anyone on the show. And then there was Marcel, the first runner-up for the *Top Chef* title. "I knew he had skills, and you want to win the money, but that's not the reason I wanted him out," Ilan said. "It was his attitude."

Ilan and Marcel both trained at the CIA, and they represent opposing strains in American cooking: keeping it real versus making it new. "On the first day of taping, when we were waiting to go on camera, Marcel said to me in his little ridiculous voice, 'Lights, camera, action, yeah?' I wanted to elbow him," Ilan recalled. The tension lasted until the two were the only ones left for the manic finale in Hawaii.

Ilan did learn something from Marcel: "He showed me how to pit olives using a funnel. You just pop the olive through the center and the pit comes right out. It's one of the greatest things I learned from anybody. It's just a little ironic that I got it from him."

So why did Ilan come out on top? Turns out he had a mantra, one that should serve him well in the real-life competition of the restaurant business: "Make the food too delicious for them to send you home."

Adam Sachs has written for GQ and the New York Times Magazine.

This article originally appeared in **March, 2007**.



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