

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Living / Food

Cooks play it by ear for 'Iron Chef'

By [JOHN KESSLER](#)

Published on: 09/07/06

Such was the beginning of my day as an "Iron Chef" judge. Following a poll of Atlanta foodies, four of our best local chefs were selected to compete for a challenger's spot on the show to be aired in 2007. The event was the kickoff to this year's Taste of Atlanta — scheduled for Oct. 14-15 in Atlantic Station.

After a full day of traveling from restaurant to restaurant, we, the six judges (three from the Food Network, two journalists and one from Taste of Atlanta), would tabulate our scores. That evening, at a huge do, Mayor Shirley Franklin and "Iron Chef America" host Alton Brown would announce the winner.

We started at Aria. Having had a lot of experience dining with strangers, I'm usually pretty good at breaking the ice. But it's hard when you're chewing meat in the morning in a restaurant as empty and white as a mausoleum. The secret ingredient was corn — specifically the piebald "butter and sugar" corn from New England. The Food Network had sent each chef a case of the stuff with no directions beyond "impress us."

Chef Gerry Klaskala sautéed his corn and paired it with that lovely pork, grits and bright green little corn shoots. It was a straightforward dish — too much so for some who deemed it "not corny enough."

Corniness would be ours soon enough. At Restaurant Eugene, chef Linton Hopkins was a cob apostle. He greeted us with corn blini topped with Georgia sturgeon caviar and sent us on our nibletty way with little balls of corn ice cream rolled in almond brittle.

But the actual dish for competition was a showstopper: lobster poached in corn milk, set over succotash, paired with tomato and corn gelée salad, and raised to the firmament with a corn soup shooter.

I didn't care that the camera was watching me snarf, it was all so good. This dish had two qualities that, for me, elevate food to the top level. One: The corn-poached lobster was novel and harmonious. I had never experienced this taste before, but now it was implanted in my memory. Two: It had perfect "plate smooch." When the rich lobster and sweet-tart balsamic-dressed salad began to bleed into each other, a new level of flavor emerged.

We piled into our caravan of SUVs (it looked like a funeral procession) and sped off toward Rathbun's in Inman Park. I asked that we drive past the King Center just to show our guests from New York there is more to Atlanta than a foundry for Iron Chefdom.

And so, corn goodness No. 3 was soon ours. Chef Kevin Rathbun outfitted slices of steak with cascabel cream sauce and a stack of corn tuiles layered with braised short rib and smoked corn.

Complex, rich, interesting. For sure. Corny enough? Nope.

It was at this point that I finally admitted to the friendly, wonderful producers of "Iron Chef America" that I've never actually seen the show, and I wasn't exactly sure what would happen to the winning chef.

If you're like me, here's the quick rundown: The winner will go up against one of the four champs — Mario Batali, Bobby Flay, Masaharu Morimoto or Cat Cora, who everyone will tell you is the "only female Iron Chef."

The contestants will have to make five servings of five dishes in one hot hour, using the secret ingredient that is presented with great fanfare. If indeed they vanquish the champ, they only get bragging rights. Iron Chefs, once forged, need not worry about replacement.

We ended the day's tasting sitting at the bar at Bacchanalia. Chef Anne Quatrano talked about how much she appreciated the product. While Southern corn is reliably sweet, she said, the Northern product can have a "cornier flavor."

Ooh, she's talking our language. Her dish was exquisite — a velvet-soft corn panna cotta outfitted with rawish kernels, lobster, micro-celery and shavings of black truffle. That panna cotta, more than anything I tried, captured the personality of this corn — sweet, yes, but also earthy and grassy.

Yet the dish lacked the unbridled lusciousness and theater of Hopkins' creation. Hers was the corn poem, his was the corn opera, and I was still humming the tune.

The judges generally agreed, and that evening the mayor and the host announced that Hopkins would be testing his mettle in New York.

Congratulations and a personal note to the chefs: Keep those dishes on your menus so others can try them. Never mind iron; they're all golden.

