

Whether Bobby Flay wins or loses, the celebrity chef loves to throw his apron into the ring. Flay is a three-time James Beard Foundation Award winner (including a win in 1993 for Rising Star Chef of the Year), a prolific restaurateur, cookbook author and four-time Daytime Emmy Award winner (for *Boy Meets Grill* with Bobby Flay and *Bobby Flay's Barbecue Addiction*).

Emmy magazine contributor **Ann Farmer** asked him how he manages to outcook the competition on Food Network's *Beat Bobby Flay* (now in its thirty-third season) and why he's avoiding the heat in his latest Food Network match, *Bobby's Triple Threat*.

You've said your ultimate comfort spot is the kitchen. When did you discover your passion for cooking?

There is a sort of infamous story of me asking for an Easy-Bake Oven when I was about six years old. It probably had something to do with the fact that I couldn't believe you could actually bake a cake with a lightbulb. So I had to see it for myself. In reality, I dropped out of high school when I was about sixteen or seventeen years old and went to work in a restaurant because I needed a job, not knowing that cooking was going to be something that I wanted to do.

You had a short stint at the American Stock Exchange. What was that all about?

I took a break from cooking. Not for very long — maybe six or eight months. I tried it. Did not like it at all. It wasn't crunching my creative juices. So I went right back into the kitchen.

After finding success as a restaurateur, you branched into television. What is it about the TV component of your career that you find fulfilling?

I love the idea that I can have an influence on the way that people eat in this country. I've been with the Food Network for almost twenty-nine years. I am really touched when someone comes up to me and says, "You've helped bring food to our table for the last decade," or whatever it might be. The idea that I can participate in people's lives like that — obviously from a distance, but through my cooking — is really special to me.

On *Beat Bobby Flay*, a culinary duel where you tend to win more than lose, what's your secret to coming up with a winning dish in a limited time?

First of all, trying to be overly clever is not a good idea in a competition. So I try to hit the sweet spot in a dish — right down the middle — in a traditional or classic way. In other words, if someone is challenging me to fried chicken or chicken parmesan, I try to make the best

DAWN HOFFMANN/DISCOVERY, INC.

Chef Bobby Flay has plenty of irons in the fire and pots on the stove as host or competitor in a trio of cooking competition shows.

Food Fights

Hosting *Bobby's Triple Threat*



version of the dish that people know, as opposed to trying to come up with something that no one's ever experienced before. Because when you hear what the dish is, you have a certain expectation.

There's a lot of trash-talking by the judges on *Beat Bobby Flay* — aimed at you.

Trash-talking is fine as long as it's not mean-spirited. I think the viewers like it. I think the competitors like it, too. As long as it doesn't disrupt the spirit, it's all good.

In 1984, you graduated in the first class of the French Culinary Institute. What is one thing you learned there that has stayed with you?

The thing that's incredibly important to learn in culinary school are the fundamentals of good cooking. And I think a lot of times people miss that. They think about the flourishes at the end that make a dish look cool. But the bottom line is, when you go to school, you learn the foundations of classic French technique. And that classic French technique can get transferred to all kinds of techniques.

Early on, you apprenticed with chef Jonathan Waxman, who introduced you to Southwestern cuisine. What is it about that cuisine that you love?

I had the Mesa Grill in New York City for twenty-six years. That restaurant lit up my career. And it was all about contemporary Southwestern food: fresh chili peppers, beans, corn in every iteration. The thing I love about that cuisine is that the flavors and the colors of the ingredients are incredibly vibrant, and they allow you to create boldly flavored dishes. The one thing you probably won't say about my food is that it's bland.

You were a regular on *Iron Chef America: The Series* for a decade. You had sixty minutes to make five winning dishes using a secret ingredient that is only revealed at the very start. How do you come up with five recipes on the fly like that?

The bottom line is, when you have to compete at a moment's notice, your mind starts to create using [familiar methods]. When we think about shellfish, like shrimp or lobster or clams, I think I can make these types of dishes: one's a pasta, one's a risotto, one's a soup. These are vehicles that I can lend the secret ingredient to. Then I utilize the flavors and ingredients that I always use and bring it to life.

You quit the series right in the middle of an episode, tearing off your chef's apron to display a T-shirt that read "This Is My Last Iron Chef Battle Ever." Why?

I had such a long career there. I wanted to do something fun and dramatic.

Your latest TV venture is *Bobby's Triple Threat*, where you pit one talented guest chef against three culinary titans. What makes it

stand apart from other cooking competition shows?

Did you ever see the movie with Paul Newman and Tom Cruise called *The Color of Money*? Paul Newman plays a veteran pool hustler. And he runs across Tom Cruise, who's also trying to make it in the world of pool. He's obviously much younger and less experienced but has some serious skills. I basically transferred that idea to *Triple Threat*, where I handpicked three chefs — Brooke Williamson, Tiffany Derry and Michael Voltaggio — as people who I think are accomplished but still have a way to go before they become household names.

You don't compete on *Triple Threat*. How does it feel to be out of the hot seat this time?

I still feel like I'm in the hot seat. It's my job to make sure that we have great matches on both sides. But also, I don't want it to be easy. I want them to be pushed up against the wall. And in the first season, [the wins were split] fifty-fifty. It actually worked out pretty well.

It does seem like the odds are stacked against the guest competitor. Aren't audiences going to root for the underdog?

I always think people are rooting against me, Bobby Flay. And I think, for the most part, they are. But then I have people who come up to me and say, "I root for you every single time." And I'm always surprised. I'm like, "You do?" I think I'd be rooting for the underdog every time.

The judges on *Triple Threat* can be really tough. What do you want to see in your judges?

I want to see fairness across the board. And I want to see really thoughtful comments and tasting. I want them to give the credit to the technique and to the lusciousness of the food when it's there. And when it's a miss, I want them to talk about it.

BBQ Brawl is another current TV project of yours, also a cooking competition. So what's the twist?

What makes it different is it's out of doors. It's all live fire cooking. So the set outdoors and the live fire cooking become characters in themselves.

What's the most important thing to know when it comes to cooking on a grill?

Every grill is different. There's hot spots. There's cold spots. You have to learn the grill so that you can be confident around it. There is a saying that you've got to be working the grill — the grill isn't working you.

What BBQ feats have you seen competitors on that show pull off that even surprised a BBQ savant like you?

When they bake on the grill, it's mesmerizing to me.

Do you enjoy eating as much as cooking?

Oh, yes. Absolutely. Food is my life.