

Lodi firefighter Kris Graves appears on Food Network show

By Maggie Creamer

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Lodi firefighter Kris Graves literally gave his blood, sweat and tears to fulfill a life-long dream: starring in a cooking show on the Food Network.

He shed blood after cutting his finger two hours before he was supposed to feed 100 people. He dripped with sweat while running through an unfamiliar grocery store grabbing supplies. And he teared up while talking about his mother, who died of cancer six years ago.

Kris will appear on "24 Hour Restaurant Battle" with his fraternal twin brother, Mike, at 10 p.m. Thursday on the Food Network. The show gives contestants 24 hours to come up with a restaurant design and decor, buy supplies, prep the food and then serve 100 hungry customers, who are ordering off a menu.

While in New York, he had cameras in his face for three days straight. He had his cellphone and laptop taken away from him. And the producers continuously pressured him to lose his composure and yell at his brother.

The 33-year-old said he is still not sure how he feels about the whole experience, although he definitely would do it again.

"I don't know how to react. ... It was an absolutely great experience, but I hated it at the time," Kris said.

The main aspect he struggled with was not being in control, and having limited time to perfect every dish.

"I hated it because I didn't think I was doing anything good enough," Kris said.

The episode, titled "Firehouse Cooks," pits the twins, who live in Santa Rosa, against another team



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Lodi Firefighter Kris Graves displays a seven-spice pork tenderloin on spicy cranberry chutney with a vegetable medley, the dish he prepared while competing on Food Network's "24-Hour Restaurant Battle" with his brother, Mike.

composed of a firefighter from Brooklyn and one of his fraternity brothers. Bragging rights and \$10,000 are at stake.

The twins grew up watching their mom and grandparents in the kitchen making "down-home, country food," Kris said. Their grandparents even owned a greasy spoon restaurant. He then honed his skills while trying out new recipes for Lodi firefighters during their 24-hour shifts.

The two breezed through two casting calls, and a couple months ago, they headed to New York.

The three-day trip started with the twins spending the six-hour flight memorizing all of the ingredients, measurements and cooking temperatures in the recipes they planned to serve.

When they landed, the show's producers took away their cellphones and laptops. They received \$4,000 to spend on food and to decorate their restaurant.

They were given an hour to shop at a large grocery store with ingredients ranging from slabs of pork to salt, and the producers required them to stay together the whole time.

"It was a nightmare. We split up the list, but we couldn't split up, so we were running all over," Graves said.

On the second day, the twins prepped the rest of the food, finished all of the decor and then served about 100 people plus the four judges.

The show has customers come in and check out both restaurants and their menu before choosing where they are going to eat. Kris prepared three appetizers, three entrees and two desserts.

Kris said the judges loved his seven-spice-rub pork tenderloin on top of a spicy cranberry chutney. He also made his mother's chocolate chip Kahlua cake.

"I wanted that country feel but to kick it up a notch, so I wasn't just serving the judges country-fried steak," Kris said.

On the third day, Kris and Mike filmed all of their extra commentary the producers use to weave the episodes together.

As a contestant, Kris said it was amazing to watch the foresight required to put together an engaging reality show. At one point, the executive producer pulled all the cameras off him, and told him he was doing a good job but needed to show more emotion.

"They want the show to be edgy, so they said, 'We want to see you freak out a little bit. Lose your mind, lose your composure,'" Kris said.

This request was especially hard because, day in and day out, Kris is constantly faced with situations where he has to calmly solve problems as a firefighter.

"I get paid to not freak out. I don't freak out," he said.

The producers even provoked a fight between him and his brother, encouraging them to argue about a main ingredient they forgot to pick up at the store.

Throughout the three days, the producers also tried to get the twins to cry while remembering their mom, Patti, who died in 2004 of uterine cancer at the age of 54.

They both finally cracked in front of the judge's table when talking about her chocolate cake and her influence on their love of food.

"They kept bringing up my mom to get some man tears. Like I said, blood, sweat and tears. I'm sure I will get ridiculed for some of the things at the firehouse," he said.

While he would not yet describe himself as a star, Graves hopes he can turn his appearance on the show into another outlet for his culinary abilities.

He will be watching the show with his family and friends at Guy Fieri's restaurant in Santa Rosa, and hopes the Food Network star will show up.

So far, there are no cooking shows with firefighters, and he said it is an untapped market. Whenever he goes to the grocery store, people constantly stop him to ask what he is cooking, if he has any recipes and when they can stop by for dinner.

"We are known for being good cooks and that familial attitude. Why wouldn't people want to see that?" he said.

In the meantime, he has started a charity with his wife and cousin to help people with cancer pay their mortgages, travel to appointments or buy groceries. He named it The Mama Bear Foundation, in honor of his mom.

"We want to ease the monetary strain cancer causes," he said.

Kris will also keep trying out new recipes and serving up meals at the firehouse.

"The only thing I do differently is I cook with love. I know that sounds cheesy, but I'm passionate about it. It's like that movie 'Chocolat,' except I'm not a Latin American woman living in the '40s riding a horse," Kris said.

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