

Time Is Tight

THE INSANITY OF OPENING A RESTAURANT GETS THE STRAITJACKET IT DESERVES IN THIS UNREALITY SHOW

By Michelle Wildgen

Sometimes I wonder why anyone would want to open a restaurant. The hours are long, the pay precarious, and the customers frequently a source of etiquette oddities, food phobias and petulant emotional displays. And yet, thank heaven, there exists an industry full of people who derive enough satisfaction from providing food and hospitality that they willingly dive into the mess. But in the Food Network's *24 Hour Restaurant Battle*, which recently kicked off its second season, they do so in such a truncated time frame that it's amazing to see success of

any kind.

Each week 2 teams see who can throw together the better restaurant in a day, as determined by chef, restaurateur and open-necked shirt devotee Scott Conant, plus a rotating series of guest judges including *Savueur*'s Gabriella Gershenson and chef Geoffrey Zakarian. Happily, the competitors are usually not neophytes who think a little bistro would be a relaxing way to spend retirement, but people who work in the industry and have some idea what they'd be getting into when they

dream of opening their own places one day. The \$10,000 prize won't get them far in that hope, but the process of competing seems to function as a bit of a dry run for the concepts and partnerships themselves, suggesting that maybe some ex-couples really could work together and open a global small-plates restaurant, or a pair of old friends could pull off a Vietnamese/Indian fusion concept.

The Fairway Test

The show illuminates these relationships to a surprising degree in a very short time.

On one episode, a trip to Fairway Market brings out a new and combative dynamic between brothers Alexi and Jonathan, but, in all fairness, Saturday afternoon at Fairway would have done the same to Gandhi. And while on another episode the closeness between on-again, off-again couple Erik and Laura provides a smooth working relationship—and in fact they seem almost ready to reunite by the end—at other times the contestants forget that people are there to eat rather than hear the extended history of the

Most satisfying is the glimpse into the creation of the little world that is the restaurant menu and dining room. Each team outfits half of one large space, and guests choose the more appealing place. And so, next to Hope and Natalie's rich orange walls and inviting fresh-fruit centerpieces, Jonathan and Alexi struggle to lure guests into their sterile, sparse, blue and white Greek diner. It goes to show you what paint and a couple of photographs can do, for with a budget of \$4,000 total for food and décor, teams don't have



Tell it: Red Team brothers Kris and Mike Graves present to the judges. © 2011 TELEVISION FOOD NETWORK G.P.

much more than that at their disposal. My favorite illustration of the budgetary push and pull between the front and back of the house was front-of-the-house contestant Davina grousing to her partner, chef Michele, about the monetary

limitations on her elegant New England dining room: “You spent too much on duck and now we have oars [on the walls].”

But perhaps the décor is deceiving, or perhaps I have bad taste, because I have yet to call the winner correctly—

at one point my notes even say, of the Greek diner concept that later won, “I’m sorry but they have no chance.” In fact, the more vibrant décor may actually end up shooting that team in the foot, because it guarantees a rush of seating

and a slammed kitchen. Is the editing too crafty for its own good, the judging process insufficiently illuminated — or have I just admitted that I am simply not that bright? Either way, it’s telling that no one, viewer or participants, seems too worked up over the outcome. Sure, we get the requisite boilerplate about the contestants’ hopes and dreams, but in the end the stakes are low, the time and budget are tight, and this is more a contest of personal accomplishment than a major professional game-changer. What it reminds me of most is the old server’s nightmare of singlehandedly serving a packed house. When you’re in the moment, it’s unbearable, but then all at once, it’s over.



Reddit: Host Conant, left, with Red Team contestant Mike Graves. © 2011 TELEVISION FOOD NETWORK G.P.



Reddit: Host Conant, left, with Red Team contestant Mike Graves. © 2011 TELEVISION FOOD NETWORK G.P.