



FOOD ON TELEVISION

Ruth Reichl and Floyd Cardoz on Judging and Winning Top Chef Masters

An exclusive look at the reality of the reality competition series

by *Ruth Reichl* · JUNE 16, 2011

I thought that being a judge on Top Chef Masters would be very different than it actually turned out to be. I was sure that the producers would be watching over our shoulders, trying to nudge us into certain outcomes, and I kind of looked forward to fighting them off. I was positive that they would be willing to sacrifice the truth for the sake of a good story.

But I was wrong. The Magical Elves never interfered, never questioned a decision, never even indicated a preference. So even though I was positive that the producers would have liked a woman winner, they never said so. Still, it doesn't take a genius to understand that, after two years of male champions, a woman coming out on top would make very good television. And if you look at [Bravo's demographics](#), you see that their audience skews heavily female; a huge percentage was probably rooting for a woman.

So they must have been thrilled, going into the finale, to find that two of the three finalists were women. And even happier, I imagine, that [Mary Sue Milliken](#) was one of them. Articulate, self-effacing and endlessly charming, she is improbably beautiful, even without a scrap of makeup. She was born to do television, and the camera followed her around like a love-struck teenager.

But in the end it was not Mary Sue, nor even the impressively talented, totally professional and utterly unflappable [Traci Des Jardins](#) (who Mary Sue kept referring to as her "dear friend"), but Floyd Cardoz who took the prize.

Floyd is a wonderful chef, which he proved over and over again during the challenges. He cooks like no one else, in part because of his unique and deeply personal relationship with spices, and his food has always provoked strong reactions. "Really good restaurants are love or hate propositions," I wrote when I first reviewed his restaurant *Tabla* in the *New York Times*. As I said back then, for me it was love at first bite. Yet every time I took guests to the restaurant, at least one person absolutely loathed the food. I thought they were crazy, but I also thought it was wonderful that Floyd's cooking could evoke such passion. His passion, however, is all on the plate; in person he is polite and shy. He doesn't grandstand—and he doesn't give good soundbite. In short, he's not a natural TV personality.

Even so, when I called to ask how he felt about winning the championship, I was hoping for a little immodest pride. But Floyd refused to cooperate, offering only the expected responses. It was great to win money for his charity. It was wonderful to be in the kitchen with Mary Sue and Traci. "Working with them was the best thing—they are such nice people." He was happy to have made a new friend in *John Currence*. "We have a real relationship now." And he did not neglect to acknowledge the younger competitors. "*George Mendes* is very talented; I'm glad I got to know him." But he is not a man who is about to spill any dirt on what went on behind the scenes.

Well, maybe just a little. Pressed, he finally admitted that in the beginning, "I was not having fun." This surprised him; his friend *Jonathan Waxman* had promised that doing the show was going to be a blast. "He said, it'll be good for you—and you'll have fun." Floyd's business partner, *Danny Meyer*, had said much the same.

But halfway through the challenges, Floyd was miserable. "I thought there'd be a lot of camaraderie, a lot of helping each other out. I thought we'd all be in this together." Instead, there was so much petty bickering, so much backbiting that he called Danny in despair. "I said, 'I don't know if I should be here. I can't be a person who's putting everybody else down, and that seems to be what it takes to win.'" Meyer talked him off the ledge. "Just relax and be yourself," he said, let the chips fall where they may. "That," says Cardoz, "was when my attitude changed."

Determined to loosen up, Cardoz stopped watching the clock. And even when things went wrong, he refused to let it get him down. When he was irritated at being criticized for his salad in the trailer episode, he simply put it behind him. "I'd be happy to put that salad on the menu of my new restaurant," he said mildly, reserving serious anger for his friend John Currence, who was, he says, robbed when he was kicked off the show for a perfect but traditional risotto. "That was one of the best dishes of the entire season!" he said.

But was he really all that relaxed? The camera tells a different story. Watch the beginning of the show. Watch the end. What you see is an incredible shrinking Floyd, who dropped some 25 pounds during the course of the competition.

And little wonder. As a judge, I was constantly amazed by the difficulty of the challenges, and I couldn't help wondering why any established chef would put him or herself through such a grueling exercise.

But Cardoz says he would do it all again. "I learned a lot about myself," he says. "Doing *Top Chef Masters* you understand your limitations. You can forget very often why you're a chef and why you cook—it took me back to who I really am."

I get the sense that he is sincere in this. The judges are so insulated from the action that we never saw what was taking place in the kitchen, and until the episodes actually aired, none of us had any inkling about what was happening behind the scenes. We did not know, for instance, that during the finale, while the other contestants were making do with one-stop shopping, sacrificing quality for convenience, Floyd insisted on seeking out the best. As he chased ingredients across the city he got snarled in LA traffic, losing a lot of time. It was frightening, but Floyd does not regret that decision. "I need to be inspired by whatever I cook," he told me, "I can't do my best work if I'm not inspired."

This is a man who has always been inspired by beautiful products. When I asked about his favorite purveyors, he perked up and became unusually animated, lovingly ticking them off one by one. "Franca from Berried Treasures," he said dreamily, "she has the best berries, potatoes, beans. I go to Susie at Cherry Lane for asparagus and lima beans, and Alex Paffenroth has such wonderful squashes..." Listening to him respond to my questions with constant, steady, even-handed graciousness, it was lovely to hear him become so emotional. "They're so passionate about their products. It's not only buying from them—it's them caring enough to give you the best," he said. And in that moment, his voice was full of wonder.

And that, he said, is what he will take away from the experience. It wasn't the camaraderie. It wasn't the money. It wasn't the new friends. It wasn't even the win. "It was," he says, "reminding myself that I'm really in this for the cooking. That's what makes me happy."