

Los Angeles Times

Food

SHOW TRACKER

'Chopped': Food Network stirs the pot with entertainment format



Food Network

NEW HOST: Ted Allen, a former guest judge on "Top Chef," now has his own gig at Food Network, hosting the new show "Chopped."

Its focus on competition shows over traditional cooking shows meets with success, and other channels are sharpening their knives.

By Rene Lynch
January 14, 2009

It's a TV cooking competition with a knife for a logo. A celebrity host. Guest judges. Mystery ingredients. A sleek industrialized kitchen. Men and women in chef's jackets racing to plate their dishes. A cash prize for the winner.

And, of course, a somber parting line for those who didn't make the cut: "You've been chopped."

What? You were expecting "Please pack your knives and go"?

Long before "Chopped" debuted Tuesday night on Food Network, the blogosphere had summarily labeled it a rip-off of Bravo's Emmy-winning TV show and pop culture phenomenon, "Top Chef."

Exhibit A? Ted Allen, a popular guest judge on "Top Chef," is the host of "Chopped."

If you feel as if you need a score card, you're not alone. Every network, it seems, is trying its hand at food-competition programming. But no one has yet figured out a way to break the mold.

"Food competitions blend together, the format is pretty much always the same," says noted food writer and occasional Food Network guest Michael Ruhlman. "The next person who comes up with that new format is going to make a lot of money."

In fact, viewers who give "Chopped" a chance may be pleasantly surprised to find that its stripped-down style relates to the everyday cook in a way that other cooking competitions don't.

Each week, four new contestants will appear on "Chopped," hailing from the culinary world's working class -- caterers, sous chefs, aspiring pastry chefs and the like. For each course, they're thrown a culinary curveball: They get just 30 minutes to cook an appetizer, entree or dessert using everyday ingredients that remain a mystery until the clock starts ticking.

Because they're cooking for only the three judges, rather than the cocktail parties for 200 that "Top Chef" tends to favor, the scale is much closer to what most home cooks experience.

Anyone who's been caught between a few paltry ingredients in the cupboards and a hungry family can identify with the contestants on "Chopped" and play along at home far more than they can with "Top Chef," or even "Iron Chef America," for that matter.

With no time to spare, contestants resort to raw cooking instinct. One person is "chopped" after each round. The last person standing gets \$10,000 -- and then goes back to his or her day job.

Allen says he was attracted by the "pure" food competition at the heart of the show. "All of the drama revolves around whether you can cook this stuff. It's really just about food. Food and panic."

That emphasis on drama -- not the traditional instructional food show -- appears to be winning over audiences as well.

Food Network says it's coming off its most successful year ever with total prime-time viewership growing 9% from 2007 to 2008, and the median age of the network's prime-time viewers landing at 44, down from 47 in 2007. (Credit goes to younger-skewing reality-competition shows and "docusoaps" such as the popular "Ace of Cakes," "Throwdown With Bobby Flay" and "Dinner Impossible.")

Executives are hoping that the trend will continue, bolstered by offerings such as "Ultimate Recipe Showdown," which brings viewers in to compete among themselves for a \$25,000 prize. There's also "Will Work for Food," in which host Adam Gertler -- a runner-up in "The Next Food Network Star" competition -- travels the country trying his hand at outlandish food jobs. (The channel's most popular show ever, "Next Food Network Star" will also be back later this year.)

But these forays into food entertainment are a sign that that the network that introduced the country to round-the-clock food programming is now just one of many channels competing for the same audience.

The Travel Channel, for example, just scored its highest-ever ratings for a new debut with "Man v. Food," in which host Adam Richman travels the country in search of food challenges, such as trying to consume a 13-pound pizza.

Michael Klein, senior vice president of content for the Travel Channel, says Food Network's shift away from traditional cooking shows into food entertainment has made them more vulnerable to all comers.

"They certainly seem to have abandoned the 'stand and stir,' " Klein says, "I think it leaves them open to more competition, frankly."

After all, very few channels have Food Network's ability to discover and brand the next Rachael Ray or Emeril. But creating a low-budget reality show around food -- whether it's a cooking competition or food-and-travel -- is within every channel's reach.

Food Network's Bob Tuschman rejects any copycat talk about "Chopped" and "Top Chef" or any suggestion that the channel has abandoned the type of food show that helped make it famous. But the channel's senior vice president of programming and production concedes that there are more food-entertainment offerings than ever before -- and that everyone sees Food Network as the one to beat.

"There are a lot of them out there," he says of competitors vying for foodies. "We take it as great flattery that a lot of other channels have watched our success" and wanted to give it a try.

If viewers can't find the traditional cooking shows they're looking for at Food Network, they might try PBS, which is sticking to the tried and true with shows such as "America's Test Kitchen" and "Lidia's Italy," starring Lidia Bastianich. There, building a franchise is more important than finding the next new thing -- or trying to duplicate it, says Christopher Kimball, publisher of Cook's Illustrated magazine and host of "America's Test Kitchen," which is based on that publication.

Take "Lidia," he says. "That's the most old-fashioned show in the world, but she has a brand that nobody can compete with."

rene.lynch@latimes.com