






# 15 chefs walk into a cruise...



Themed pleasure voyages are all the rage, which helps explain **Top Chef: The Cruise**, a four-day Caribbean jaunt based on Bravo's popular cooking competition. We were there. It was . . . *interesting*.

BY CHRIS CLAYTON / ILLUSTRATIONS BY PABLO LOBATO



**O**n a bright spring afternoon in the tropics, a 91,000-ton party barge chugs past a small socialist nation. The former—the cruise ship *Celebrity Constellation*—keeps its distance from the hilly coastline. Many of its passengers congregate on the main deck, where they splash in the pool, stroll around an elevated track and sun themselves on chairs the size of twin mattresses, occasionally lifting colorful cocktails to their lips. Up-tempo reggae booms from hidden speakers. It's relentless.

Here at the confluence of the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, the water is a shade of cerulean normally reserved for sports drinks. Cuba is just plain brown, but the context—luxury liner meets oppressed single-party state—makes it more distracting than the sea's otherworldly tone. Sitting in a shady corner at the rear of the ship, enjoying my booze-and-junk food-fueled privilege, I can't help but feel guilty. I take a gulp of piña colada and a bite of cheeseburger, because sometimes the best way to fight shame—no matter how



half-baked—is with more shame.

A seagull swoops down and parks himself on the railing within spitting distance of me. He cocks his head, as if to say, “Where the hell am I?” While embarking on my first cruise a few days back, I was like my feathered friend here (or any Cuban with a pair of strong binoculars): an outsider looking in. But after days at sea, I’m a pleasure voyage pro, which explains why at three in the afternoon I’m buzzed on rum, eating beef for no good reason and anthropomorphizing a seagull. Gluttony is fun, but it can make you crazy.

Welcome to *Top Chef: The Cruise*, a four-day journey from Miami to Key West to Cozumel and back based on

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the panel of judges orders one chef to “pack your knives and go,” until a single toque remains. He or she leaves with cash, bragging rights and, sometimes, fame. Past winners include bona fide celeb chefs such as Stephanie Izard and Michael Voltaggio.

Now in its 11th season, *Top Chef* is an institution with its own heroes (affable sage Colicchio, girl next door Simmons), villains (ice queen host Padma Lakshmi) and lexicon (short challenges are called “quick-fires,” competitors are referred to as “cheftestants”). The pedigree of its players, hosts and judges makes it easily the most “foodie” cooking contest on TV, loved by big-league chefs and home cooks alike. It’s also the most food-focused. Where the *Iron Chefs* of the world play up the spectacle of competition rather than what’s on the plate, Bravo’s Emmy-winning jewel smartly does both.

The *Top Chef* cruise, however, is mostly spectacle. Paul Qui and other *Top Chef* alums give \$150 cooking demos throughout the week, but the *Constellation* kitchen staff prepares 99.9 percent of our meals, which we eat in a variety of settings—from the all-inclusive buffet on deck 10 to the grand, double-decker restaurant on decks four and five to the pay-extra steak house on 11. Many of the onboard menus feature dishes dreamed up but not cooked by *Top Chef* chefs (TCCs hereafter). The first night, I try a zingy himachi dish created by season three’s Casey Thompson, but I’m a little disappointed. For some reason, I was under the assumption going in that Thompson and her fellow TCCs would be whipping up dinner for 2,000 each night, which, come to think of it, doesn’t sound that far removed from what they’ve endured on the show.

But people aren’t really here for the food. In an age when chefs are rock stars, sometimes you don’t care if you see the rock stars rock out—it’s good enough just being in the same room with them. The *Top Chef* cruise takes that notion a step further by offering planned activities with TCCs, which is how I end up

losing a Ping-Pong match to the permanently fedora’ed Spike Mendelsohn and shooting tequila with Tiffany Derry in Cozumel. And therein lies the genius of this particular themed cruise: It allows just enough access to the rock stars to make passengers feel like they’re vacationing with them.

**I**

t’s 11 a.m. on day one, and I’m standing on the gangway waiting to board the *Constellation*. I’ve heard it described as a midsized megaliner, but it looks full-sized to me—and by that I mean freaking enormous. “Connie,” as its groupies call it, is 965 feet long and around 105 feet wide, and it boasts 11 guest decks, a spiffy navy and white exterior and a huge X on the rear funnel, an apparent nod to the Greek shipping company that used to own Celebrity Cruises. I like the X. It looks pirate-y.

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At one point, an extraordinarily **INEBRIATED** woman with **BEAUTY PAGEANT HAIR** gets out of her seat and runs down the aisle toward the stage like she’s been picked for **THE PRICE IS RIGHT.**”



the popular cooking competition on cable giant Bravo. Theme cruises are nothing new, but the past decade has seen an explosion of boat trips catering to specific groups, no matter how niche. In 2013, this has included Mormons, nudists, quilters, indie rockers, ghost hunters, readers of *The Nation* and, yep, devotees of televised cooking contests. I fall into that last category, but I’m mostly here to view the theme cruise trend in action—to see if a pop culture phenomenon like *Top Chef* can find its sea legs. You know, hard-core investigative journalism.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:  
A "QUICKFIRE CHALLENGE"  
ON THE TOP CHEF CRUISE;  
CHEF HUBERT KELLER DJ'S  
THE CRUISE'S CLOSING  
PARTY; KRISTEN KISH HOSTS  
A COOKING DEMO.

Ahead of me in line is a middle-aged guy with a Tom Selleck mustache. He's pulling a Celebrity-branded suitcase that matches his wife's. This clearly isn't their first rodeo. I ask them if they're *Top Chef* fans. "I am," says the man, "but my wife's just along for the ride." She smiles and asks if I'm traveling alone. I nod and suddenly feel self-conscious, adding, "but I'm writing about it for a magazine." It comes out in one word; I think I sound defensive.

The staffer who snaps my photo ("in case we need to find you," she says ominously) also asks if I'm solo, as does the guy who checks me through security. Finally free from judgment, this proud solo traveler steps onto deck four and into a long hallway lined with life-sized cardboard cutouts of the TCCs. There's Fabio Viviani, the Shakespearean clown of a chef from season five! There's sad-eyed Brooke Williamson, who lost to Kish last season!

I make my way into a casino called Fortunes, which has an Atlantic City-in-the-late-'80s vibe that I'm really digging (think low ceilings, plenty of brass accents), and continue aftward into a jarringly different milieu. It's a sort of art deco atrium, the centerpiece of which is a marble staircase lit in yellow that connects to deck three. Long banners hang from the ceiling advertising *Top Chef: The Cruise* and its guests of honor. Passengers mill about, waiting for the loudspeaker to tell us that our staterooms are ready.

Making our milling a little funkier is the DJ hunched over a pair of laptops at the top of the stairs. I walk to Martini Bar, the atrium's creatively named freestanding starboard lounge. The bar top itself glows green and is covered in frost, proof that the chilled bar trend may never die. Adults ages 30 to 80 ring the area, frantically ordering cocktails—because apparently cruises are to grownups what Cancun is to college kids. I get the Padmatini, a gin drink named for the aforementioned *Top Chef* host, and marvel at all the brand integration. From the cocktails to the banners to the elevator doors that are decorated with forks, knives and the words *All Fans on Deck*, the *Constellation* has been sufficiently *Top Chef*-ified.

"Angelo!" Someone is screaming. "ANGELO!!!!!" I whip around and experience my first TCC sighting. Angelo Sosa is in the house, emitting the same sly sensuality that made him infamous on season seven. The screamer is a young woman with jet-black hair and heels up to here. She gives him the kind of hug that'll get you a restraining order in most states (but not at sea!). Then Michael Isabella from season six wanders in and people start whistling and yelling, "Mikey!" Both TCCs have security guards trailing close behind, and the way everyone's freaking out, you'd think the two chefs were in a boy band (related: The outfit behind this chef-y journey, Rose Tours, is also responsible

for the annual New Kids On The Block Cruise).

After another half-hour of the TCC parade—"Kristen!," "Hoseal," "Hubert!"—the great and powerful loudspeaker gives us the news we've been waiting for. I descend to the bowels of the ship to my suite, which is the size of a college dorm room—albeit a clean, contemporary one decked out with IKEA-style tables and shelving. The porthole sits just above the water, which adds a sense of drama to the affair. I feel like a very spoiled stowaway.

After a nap and a shower, it's time for dinner at The San Marco Restaurant, the double-decker eatery staffed by friendly waiters with vaguely Eastern European accents. Save for Spike's "sweet and sour red snapper" and the fact that the ship finally rumbles out to sea, the highlight of the meal is meeting my tablemates: a correspondent from an entertainment rag and a young writer from a cruise review site who has brought along his mom.

Like many passengers here, quiet Mr. Cruise Review and his outgoing mother have spent their fair share of time aboard ocean liners (they once even celebrated Thanksgiving on a cruise). "The *Constellation* is verrrrry nice," mom assures me. "Some ships? Not so much." The entertainment writer is a first-timer like me and wears a bemused smile throughout the night.

After dinner, I chat with a revolving door of pleasant, engaging people, including a very chill pair of 50-somethings from Pennsylvania who introduce themselves as practicing

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(*Top Chef* continued from page 77)

Buddhists who frack their land for good money. My immediate reaction, which I keep to myself: Is there anything more “America 2013” than a fracking Buddhist?

Later, I watch a live quickfire challenge in the 900-seat theater located in the bow on decks three to five. Onstage, TCCs such as Qui, Viviani, Isabella and Williamson battle it out in cook-offs with a little help from volunteers. One challenge asks the chefs to create a fine-dining bite using only canned food. Qui’s bean and fish soup wins by a landslide.

It all feels very similar to *Top Chef*, only live, drunk and more profane. The chefs constantly trash-talk each other. Viviani calls Qui “the king of skinny jeans”—though the Italian’s are pretty slim, too. Angelo Sosa makes fun of Isabella’s burnt toast. At one point, an extraordinarily inebriated woman with beauty pageant hair gets out of her seat and runs down the aisle toward the stage like she’s been picked for *The Price Is Right*. “Choose me!” she yells. “I want to help!” Needless to say, she is not chosen and eventually staggers back to her seat, followed by a cloud of four-letter words and heavy perfume. That’s my cue to go to bed.

**T**he following days zip by in a blur. My review of Key West, where we dock for a few hours one morning: funky-quaint, with Easter egg-colored houses and bums that look like *Pirates of the Caribbean* extras. Cozumel? Overrated, though the tequila tour with season seven’s Tiffany Derry is fun—picture a parade of jeeps stopping at a small distillery and a few oceanside restaurants. Derry emanates good vibes, offering kind words to all, including the distillery’s tasting host, to whom she says, “Damn, that’s nice!” after sampling the añejo. *Top Chef* fans zero in on Derry’s winning

## Puzzle Answers //

Easy KENKEN

2	1	3	4
3	2	4	1
4	3	1	2
1	4	2	3

Hard KENKEN

1	3	5	6	2	4
2	1	3	5	4	6
4	6	1	3	5	2
5	4	6	2	3	1
3	2	4	1	6	5
6	5	2	4	1	3

Easy Sudoku

4	2	3	9	7	6	8	5	1
7	1	9	5	4	8	3	6	2
6	8	5	3	2	1	7	4	9
1	5	4	6	3	7	9	2	8
3	7	2	4	8	9	6	1	5
9	6	8	2	1	5	4	7	3
2	3	6	8	5	4	1	9	7
5	4	1	7	9	3	2	8	6
8	9	7	1	6	2	5	3	4

Hard Sudoku

8	6	7	4	1	3	5	9	2
5	2	4	9	8	6	7	3	1
1	3	9	7	5	2	8	4	6
7	4	1	3	6	5	2	8	9
6	5	3	8	2	9	4	1	7
2	9	8	1	4	7	6	5	3
3	8	2	5	7	1	9	6	4
4	1	6	2	9	8	3	7	5
9	7	5	6	3	4	1	2	8

M	A	M	B	A	A	B	C	S	S	A	A	B
A	R	I	E	S	T	O	R	E	E	D	N	A
S	C	R	A	P	O	L	A	V	M	A	Y	I
T	H	A	T	C	A	N	T	B	E	R	I	G
					T	A	L		B	R	O	I
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U	T	A	H		L	A	Z	Y	S	N	O	W
K	O	B	E		O	N	O		L	E	O	
E	V	E	R	Y	W	O	R	D	I	S	T	R
					A	A	S		B	I	Z	
												B
E	S	P	N		B	A	M	A	Y	V	E	S
S	V	U		N	B	A			R	C	A	
W	E	L	L	I	L	L	B	E	D	A	M	N
A	N	K	A		A	B	L	Y		B	I	O
N	S	E	C		B	O	A	R		B	L	O
S	O	R	E		S	A	M	E		Y	E	N
												T

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## Additional Photography Credits //

### Cover, pages 4, 68-73 //

Mario Batali photographed by Justin Stephens. Food stylist: Erika Martins. Set Design and Prop stylist: Emily Mullen. Wardrobe assistant: Allison Cirbus. Groomer: Jill McKay. Producer: Liz Lang.

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xxx (Diana; Stone Angels/David Kosakas [Grace of Monaco]; Universal Pictures [Snow White & The Huntsmen]; Jan Thijs. © 2012 Relativity Media [Mirror, Mirror]; Warner Bros. [The Prestige]; Bull's Eye Entertainment/Photofest [The Illusionist]; Walt Disney Pictures/Pixar/Photofest [A Bug's Life]; Dreamworks [Antz]; Universal Pictures/Photofest [Dante's Peak]; Mercy Ships [Donald Stephens].

### Page 58-59 //

**Circle Photo:** Bob Kupbens (Phoenix)

**Page 58:** Inner Cowboy: Sheraton Wild Horse Pass Resort & Spa (Upper Lobby); shutterstock.com (boots); Mark Crudup (trail ride). Oasis Seeker: Royal Palms Resort and Spa (Alvadora Villa); Adam Rodriguez (Desert Botanical Garden); Gary Kufner (The Spa at Camelback Inn); David B Moore (Lon's at the Hermosa).

**Page 59:** Art and Design Buff: The Clarendon Hotel (pool); Andrew Pielage, the Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation (Taliesin West); Bill Timmerman (Phoenix Art Museum); Andrew Pielage (Roosevelt Row). Desert Explorer: Mark Boisclair (Edge Bar); Greater Phoenix CVB (Camelback Mountain); Russell Kirk/Golflinks-photography.com (Troon North Golf Club). Budding Anthropologist: Pueblo Grande Museum Archaeological Park (exhibit); Craig Smith (Heard Museum); Greater Phoenix CVB (Musical Instrument Museum).

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personality and pepper her with questions throughout the morning. She handles it all with grace.

My onboard experiences are more interesting thanks to my near constant interaction with total strangers. The introvert in me was initially worried about the unspoken “hang with thy neighbor” mandate of cruising. But nearly everyone I encounter is great, including the exceedingly cheery cruise director Damian de Lorenzis, who I chat up one morning in the earth-toned espresso bar on deck five. The Toronto native, 37, is a hospitality lifer who joined Celebrity in 2002, drawn by the changing face of the industry.

“The cruise sector started to grow in the 1990s,” he tells me. “It began attracting a more diverse crowd and offering more unique itineraries.” (Data from the Cruise Lines International Association confirms this take: The industry added 167 new ships between 2000 and 2013 compared to just 40 in the '80s. CLIA lists “big brand entertainment” and “specialty dining” as two of the fastest-growing trends in floating vacations.)

On day three in the ship's upscale Reflections Lounge (deck 11), I meet two more strangers: Tom Colicchio and Gail Simmons. I've purposefully kept my distance from the *Top Chef* cast so far, preferring to watch the cruise unfold organically. But at the last minute, I set up this talk through Bravo. For two mega-successful food celebrities, Colicchio and Simmons are pretty humble. Colicchio, in plaid shorts, a T-shirt and a Panama Jack hat covering his famously bald dome, deflects questions about his own success, instead talking about his wife and two sons. “People think I have this crazy life,” he says, “but most nights I try to be home making dinner for the family.” Simmons, rocking white jeans and TV-ready makeup, is equally low-key: “I'm incredibly blessed that I'm able to do things like *Top Chef* and *Food & Wine*.”

“Are the superfans freaking you out yet?” I ask. They laugh, and, perhaps tellingly, leave it at that.

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A word about these cooking show zealots: Most are respectful and well behaved, but we're in a self-contained city here, and every city has its baddies/crazies.

Exhibit A: The woman I run into one night on the elevator who's cradling cardboard Chris Crary (season nine—pretty boy with a heart of gold). I ask her how she plans on getting it home. She ignores me.

Exhibit B: A rail-thin woman—maybe 25 years old—in a cream-colored gown who corners me in the casino and tears up while telling me about her Chihuahua's plastic surgery history. HISTORY! (The pooch has some sort of eyelid condition that makes blinking difficult—thus *surgeries*.)

Despite the oddballs, the TCCs seem to get more comfortable in their role as “famous people on display” as the trip wears on. On the last two days, with the aid of Padmatinis, I give in to my inner superfan and decide to hang out with the chefs and hopefully not come across like Ms. Cardboard Thief. On night three I drink Red Stripe with Crary and Kish while watching Colicchio's band play Springsteen covers on the pool deck. (Tom Colicchio is cool. So is Kish, who later that night storms the kitchen, takes a room service call, makes a grilled cheese and delivers it to a very surprised passenger.)

Night four finds me dancing with the Bravo crew in the atrium while French chef Hubert Keller performs a DJ set. I lean over and tell Simmons that this has been the weirdest week of my life. “I could write a book,” she says, pumping her fist in the air.

Watching a 60-something fine-dining legend drop EDM anthems for a crowd of hundreds on a boat in the middle of the Caribbean is almost too much. But I guess that's the point. Cruises are seductive because they offer overdone, off-the-grid escapism. The theme versions throw in the cult of celebrity as a bonus. I think I like theme cruises. And I think I'm ready to go home. //