

## Counting Down 40 Best TV Shows of 2025: #30-21

By Steve Sternberg



Twenty years ago, most TV critics lists of best series of the year tended to include largely the same shows. Viewer choices for original scripted series were limited to broadcast networks, and a few ad-supported and premium cable shows. The top cable series tended to make everyone's list since they did not have the same content restrictions as the broadcast networks.

In 2005, most "best of" lists were populated by broadcast shows such as *Lost*, *House*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Boston Legal*, *The West Wing*, *The Office*, *24*, *Arrested Development*, and *Will & Grace*, ad-supported cable series like *The Shield*, *Rescue Me*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, and premium cable shows *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, and *Six Feet Under*.

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Ten years later, in 2015, annual best series lists were still largely similar, although there began to be some divergence – ad-supported cable (with series such as [Fargo](#), [Mad Men](#), [Better Call Saul](#), [The Americans](#), [Justified](#), [Mr. Robot](#), and [Halt and Catch Fire](#)), and premium cable series (with shows like [Veep](#), [Boardwalk Empire](#), [The Leftovers](#), [True Detective](#), [Game of Thrones](#), [Homeland](#), and [The Affair](#)), were both in their heyday. Streaming (mostly on Netflix) was just starting to enter the mix with high-quality shows (such as [House of Cards](#), [Orange is the New Black](#), [Narcos](#), [Jessica Jones](#), [BoJack Horseman](#), and [Transparent](#)). Broadcast series that previously would have made the cut were starting to fade from these lists.

Today, there are so many good original scripted series, on multiple streaming platforms, that any 100 people you ask might have substantially different lists of their favorite shows of the year. Even the most diligent TV critics would have trouble watching every TV show out there. And, of course, few if any critics lists will contain more than a couple broadcast series (if any) these days – which is not to say that viewer lists wouldn't. Several broadcast series (such as the [NCIS's](#) and other CBS procedurals like [Tracker](#) and [Matlock](#), NBC [Chicago](#) and [Law & Order](#) franchises, ABC's [High Potential](#), [Grey's Anatomy](#),

and [911](#) shows) are more popular than most streaming series.

My list of 40 best TV series of 2025 is by definition subjective and may vary significantly from yours. But if you haven't seen some of the series I discuss here, you wouldn't be wasting your time to check them out. This is part 2, which covers #30-21. Just as a reminder, #40-31 were, [The Recruit](#) (Netflix),



*Untamed* (Netflix), *Duster* (HBO Max), *Cross* (Prime Video), *Will Trent* (ABC), *Gen V* (Prime Video), *Tulsa King* (Paramount+), *Department Q* (Netflix), *The Agency* (Showtime, Paramount+), *Murder in a Small Town* (Fox).

## #30



### **Peacemaker** – season 2 (HBO Max)

Jan. 2022, Aug. 2025

[John Cena](#) reprises his role as the jingoistic vigilante “hero,” Chris Smith / Peacemaker from the 2021 theatrical film, *The Suicide Squad*. He fights for peace no matter how many people

he has to kill to get it, in this violently irreverent satire on the superhero genre. Series creator James Gunn has reportedly described Peacemaker as a “douchebag Captain America” (although this has been tempered down in season 2).

*Peacemaker* is the first original DC series to premiere on HBO Max. You’ll either love it or hate it, from the opening title sequence song and dance number performed by various cast members, to all the blood-soaked action.

The first season is set in the previous iteration of DC, known as the DC Extended Universe (DCEU), which began with the 2013 *Man of Steel* Superman movie, and included the several CW superhero television series as well as the *Justice League*, *Wonder Woman*, *Aquaman*, and *Suicide Squad* films, and concluded with the 2023 *The Flash* movie.

In 2025, the *Superman* theatrical movie launched the new DC Universe (DCU), which includes season 2 of *Peacemaker*.



In **season 1**, after recovering from injuries he suffered in 2021's [The Suicide Squad](#) movie, Peacemaker is compelled to join Homeland Security's mysterious A.R.G.U.S. black ops unit, *Project Butterfly*. They are tasked with identifying and eliminating alien parasitic butterfly-like creatures who plan to conquer Earth by possessing and taking over human hosts around the world.



Peacemaker's team, also known as the *11<sup>th</sup> Street Kids* (named for the song by glam-rock band Hanoi Rocks), includes, Leota Adebayo ([Danielle Brooks](#)), the daughter of A.R.G.U.S. leader Amanda Waller, John Economos ([Steve Agee](#)), a hacker who provides tactical support, Emilia Harcourt ([Jennifer Holland](#)), an A.R.G.U.S. agent who has a complicated relationship with Peacemaker, the unstable Adrian Chase / Vigilante ([Freddie Stroma](#)), a self-proclaimed crimefighter who looks up to Peacemaker, and Chris's beloved pet eagle, Eagly (which is more than it seems).



Peacemaker's job is not made any easier by his white supremacist father, Auggie ([Robert Patrick](#)), also known as the White Dragon, who supplies him with technology to aid his mission. Peacemaker blames Auggie for the death of his brother Keith when they were children – Auggie forced them into a no-holds-barred fight (he took bets on the outcome). Peacemaker accidentally killed his brother, and has been living with the trauma and guilt ever since. They blame one another for Keith's death, and it comes to a head when Auggie unsuccessfully tries to kill Peacemaker and his team.



The threat of the White Dragon over, Peacemaker's team still has to find a way to stop the alien parasites from completing their mission. In the season finale, they make their dangerous last stand to stop the

Butterflies. Adebayo asks her mother Amanda Waller ([Viola Davis](#)) for backup, but is told no one can come immediately, and when they do arrive, it's too late to help.

**Season 2** premiered following the 2025 [Superman](#) movie, which began the new DC Universe (DCU). This is the first live-action series in the DCU, retroactively incorporating [Peacemaker](#) into the DCU continuity – which resulted in the character becoming less obnoxious, violent, and clueless than he was in the movie and first season of the TV show.



At the end of season 1, a surprise cameo shows the Justice League arriving too late to help fight the aliens. In the recap at the beginning of season 2, it's the Justice Gang who arrives after Peacemaker's team defeats the aliens (since the Justice League does not yet exist in the new

DCU). The ending of season 1 (which aired three years earlier) was modified for the start of season 2 to include Hawkgirl, Green Lantern, and Mr. Terrific from the [Superman](#) movie's Justice Gang, as well as the new Superman and Supergirl (as opposed to the Justice League heroes, Superman, Aquaman, Flash, and Wonder Woman, who were shown in the original season 1 finale).

There's a lot going on in the season 2.



Peacemaker, frustrated by not being taken as seriously as some other heroes, interviews with Green Lantern and Hawkgirl to join the Justice Gang but is rejected.



In the Quantum Unfolding Chamber (QUC), a near infinite storage area that also connects to other universes (and is hidden in Peacemaker's apartment), Peacemaker discovers a portal to an alternate universe, dubbed *Earth-2*, in which versions of his father and brother are still alive. In this reality, they are part



of a popular, seemingly virtuous, hero team known as the *Top Trio*, which includes Peacemaker, his father Auggie, who is known here as the Blue Dragon, and his adult brother Kevin ([David Denman](#)), known as Captain Triumph. When he is confronted by the alternate version of himself, who brutally attacks him, he manages to kill him instead. He decides to impersonate him and explore this universe, which has similarities and some striking differences to his own.



It turns out that 35 years ago, Peacemaker (then just Chris Smith), went on a hunting trip with his father and brother, where they discover an extraterrestrial creature, whom Chris's father kills. They discover the QUC, which the creature used to travel to their reality. Chris's father takes the device and reconnects it to a doorway in their home.

Thinking this reality superior to his own, and thrilled to get to know his "brother" and a seemingly heroic version of his father, he wants to remain there – until his teammates arrive to persuade him to come home, and they discover the disturbing truth about the alternate Earth.



[Frank Grillo](#) is Rick Flag Sr., the new A.R.G.U.S. director and father of the deceased *Suicide Squad* leader, Rick Flag Jr, (who Peacemaker killed in the 2021 movie). He's obsessed with getting revenge, and orders his agents to monitor Peacemaker's activities and eventually apprehend him. He is also searching for the QUC and has a secret and deadly agenda of his own.



Once located, Flag instructs A.R.G.U.S. agents to go through various doors in the QUC, which lead to alternate dimensions. He's searching for one that can support human life, but many are extremely dangerous and several agents are killed when they open the wrong doors.

The rest of the main cast includes:



[Chukwudi Iwujia](#) as Clemson Murn (season 1), a mercenary and leader of Project Butterfly, who reports to Amanda Waller.



[Nhut Le](#) is Rip Jagger / Judomaster, a Cheetos-eating martial artist who crossed paths with the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Kids in season 1, and is hired by A.R.G.U.S. to help capture Peacemaker in season 2.



[Sol Rodriguez](#) as Sasha Bordeaux (season 2), a cybernetically enhanced A.R.G.U.S. agent tasked with monitoring Peacemaker's activities and either catching or killing him.



[Tim Meadows](#) is Langston Fuery (season 2), an agent assigned by Bordeaux to supervise Economos with monitoring Peacemaker. He suffers from “bird blindness,” which prevents him from distinguishing between birds.



[Michael Rooker](#) is Red St. Wild (season 2), the world's foremost eagle hunter, who is hired by A.R.G.U.S. to kill Eagly.

The season finale reportedly ties in to the larger DCU, specifically the upcoming HBO Max series, [Lanterns](#), which will feature the popular Hal Jordan and John Stewart Green Lantern characters from the comic books. There are no current plans for a third season, but characters from the series may appear in other upcoming DCU projects.

## #29



### **Poker Face** – season 2 ([Peacock](#))

Jan. 2023, May 2025

Charlie Cale (the wonderful [Natasha Lyonne](#)), has an extraordinary ability to read people and determine whether they are lying – a handy skill for a former poker hustler to have.

Whenever she sees someone lying, she can't help but blurt out, "bull\$hit."

In **season 1**, a powerful casino boss has her banned from playing cards for money in Nevada, but he takes a liking to her and hires her as a cocktail waitress at one of his casinos. But when her lie-detecting skill unmask the casino boss's son ([Adrien Brody](#)) and his enforcer Cliff ([Benjamin Bratt](#)) as murderers, it puts a target on her back and she goes on the run. The gangster boss tells her over the phone, "There's no place off the grid that's far enough off the grid that we can't find you." That's an assertion she puts to the test as she hits the road in her Plymouth Barracuda.

In each episode, Charlie comes across a new cast of characters, along with a new murder mystery she can't resist investigating. The description blurbs for each episode on the Peacock guide ends with, "Charlie suspects foul play."

The formula remains essentially the same. We see the murder at the beginning of each episode, then we flash back to see how Charlie comes to town and gets a job at or near where the crime occurs. She is the only one who suspects the real criminal, and sets out to solve the mystery, reveal the true culprits, and then get out of town before Cliff and his goons can find her.

Clearly inspired by classic 1970s and 1980s network procedurals such as [Columbo](#) and [Murder, She Wrote](#) (with elements of [The Fugitive](#) thrown in), this modernized retro comedy-drama is what they



call a “howcatchem” (rather than a “whodunnit”). The viewer knows who committed the crime, the only suspense is in how Charlie will trip them up.



Part of the appeal of [Columbo](#) was Peter Falk’s charisma, instantly recognizable voice, and the surety he is going to solve the crime every week – despite (or because of) the fact that the criminals invariably underestimate him until it’s too late. The same is true for [Natasha Lyonne](#) here. Just like sitcoms, these are situation dramas – people aren’t tuning in for the plots, but rather to see the stars in slight variations of the same situation week after week (or episode after episode for the bingers among us).



The singular device of how Charlie solves each crime – not based on highly honed detective skills, but rather simply because she can tell when someone is lying, should get tiresome after a few episodes, but somehow doesn’t. It also stretches credulity that an unarmed woman can confront murderers every week and tell them she knows they are guilty and plans to prove it, yet continue to be unscathed (a stranger in town with no local connections should be relatively easy for a killer to dispose of). But these are just minor quibbles for a show that is so thoroughly enjoyable (and in season 2, she is in more danger as some of the bad guys do try to eliminate her).



The **season 1** finale is simply brilliant. The show opens with a montage of the many times Cliff came close to finding Charlie over the course of the past year. For the first time we see the gangster ([Ron Perlman](#)) who ordered Cliff to track her down. Then... I won’t spoil what happens, but it perfectly sets up the second season.



In **season 2**, Charlie is no longer on the run from the mob, but she's still wandering from town to town as she tries to figure out what to do with her newfound freedom. They were smart not to change the basic case-of-the-week format. The show continues to be extremely well written, and Charlie is a uniquely likeable character (which helps overcome the sometimes depressing death of the week).



Just like those procedurals from the '70s and '80s, well-known guest stars pop up in each episode as either perpetrators or victims. The season 1 guest list includes, John Ratzenberger, Brandon Michael Hall, Lil Rel Howery, Danielle Macdonald, Chloe Sevigny, Judith Light, S. Epatha Merkerson, Simon Helberg, Ellen Barkin, Tim Meadows, Jameela Jamil, Cherry Jones, Tim Russ, Luis Guzman, Nick Nolte, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Stephanie Hsu, and Rhea Perlman.



Season 2 guest stars include, Cynthia Erivo, Jin Ha, Jasmine Guy, Giancarlo Esposito, Kevin Corrigan, Katie Holmes, John Mulaney, Richard Kind, Kumail Nanjiani, John Sayles, Simon Rex, Brandon Perea, Carol Kane, Margo Martindale, Melanie Lynskey, John Cho, Awkwafina, David Alan Grier, Cliff "Method Man" Smith, Jason Ritter, Taylor Schilling, Justin Theroux, and Haley Joel Osment.



Since each episode is a self-contained story with a new supporting cast, some episodes work better than others. But the majority that do work are lots of fun. The season 2 finale is a two-parter that where Charlie may finally have met her match, and seemed to be setting up a third season with Charlie again on the run. Surprisingly, Peacock recently announced it has canceled the

show. The series' creator, Rian Johnson, is reportedly shopping the show to other networks, with [Peter Dinklage](#) taking over the lead role (I can't imagine that show being nearly as good).

## #28



### Running Point ([Netflix](#))

Feb. 2025

Delightful comedy from [Mindy Kaling](#), starring [Kate Hudson](#) as Isla Gordon, a reformed party girl, who's unexpectedly elevated from her role as coordinator of charitable endeavors, to president of her family's pro basketball team, the fictional Los Angeles Waves – one of the winningest teams of all time.

Isla has always been the most knowledgeable basketball person in her family, but her sexist father wouldn't allow her to be involved in any significant team operations. Her eldest brother Cam ([Justin Teroux](#)) put her in charge when his drug addiction came to light and he had to step down as team president and enter rehab. The Waves are having a down year, struggling to make the playoffs and retain sponsors, and it falls to Isla to turn things around – despite few thinking she is qualified



Isla's older brother Ness ([Scott MacArthur](#)) and younger half-brother Sandy ([Drew Tarver](#)), the general manager and chief financial officer of the team, respectively, are none too happy with the new situation, and initially try to undermine her and get the board to vote her out.

At the same time, she has to deal with privileged, selfish, and egotistical players, many of whom feel they don't have to listen to anything she says.



You should enjoy how Isla gets her brothers, the board, and the players in line, once they all start to realize she knows more about basketball than any of them, is a born leader, and her innovative ideas might just help the team as they drive for the playoffs. It's been renewed for a second season.

The rest of the main cast includes:



**Chet Hanks** as Travis Bugg, the problematic point guard for the Waves. Aging but still great player, with a bad attitude, he's hiding a knee injury and becomes addicted to the pain killers.



**Toby Sandeman** as Marcus Winfield, the long-time star player of the Waves. Self-centered, and always putting himself before the team, Isla tries to get him to be a true leader.



**Brenda Song** as Ali Lee, Isla's best friend and chief of staff for the Waves. She's the only one who has had Isla's back no matter what.



**Fabrizio Guido** as Jackie Moreno, a vendor at Waves games, whom they discover is actually the Gordon siblings' younger half-brother.



**Uche Agada** as Dyson Gibbs, a rookie who Isla drafted from the D-League, against her brothers' wishes.



**Jay Ellis** as Jay Brown, the calm, cool, and collected head coach of the Waves. His ex-wife is moving out-of-state with his kids, and he may follow suit. But then there's that kiss.

## #27



### **Smoke** (Apple TV+)

June 2025

[Taron Egerton](#) stars in this psychological crime thriller as Dave Gudsen, an elite arson investigator and former firefighter in the fictional city of UMBERLAND, in the Pacific Northwest, who is

trying to catch two serial arsonists. Columbia Metro Police detective Michelle Calderone ([Jurnee Smollett](#)), a former marine with a past fire-related trauma, is assigned to help him with his investigation. The series is inspired by the 2021 podcast, [Firebug](#), about real-life serial arsonist, that terrorized Southern California in the early 1990s.



Dave Gudsen is considered one of the top arson investigators in the country, but has been unsuccessful in generating a single suspect in either case – one has been going on for more than a year, another for about six months. He is also an aspiring novelist, and we see him record

various chapters of his book (which has thinly veiled characters and situations from his actual arson investigations).



Michelle Calderone had been having an affair with her married captain ([Rafe Spall](#)), and after breaking off their relationship he relegated her to arson investigation (which apparently has a lower clearance rate than

auto theft) as revenge.



As the arsons continue and clues start to lead them in multiple directions, an early surprise twist thrusts the show into a new, and much more interesting sphere, as one of the arsonists plays a suspenseful cat-and-mouse game with Calderone. There's another surprise reveal that turns the show from a standard crime thriller into a deeper psychological drama about illusions, delusions, and how someone can manifest an image that fools almost everyone – and what happens when cracks start to emerge in the carefully constructed façade..

Michelle starts to think that Dave might actually be one of the arsonists, but she has no usable evidence. She finds the recording of the novel Dave is working on, and realizes that he describes details of one of the arsons that only the arsonist would know. As she and Dave continue to investigate the two arson cases, she secretly starts to investigate Dave.



[Egerton's](#) performance is riveting and unnerving, as he seamlessly shifts between seeming heroic and menacing. [Smollett](#) holds her own with her steely determination to expose the truth as she deals with her own trauma. Dave and Michelle are extremely clever and resourceful, and will break whatever rules get in the way of achieving their goals, which puts them both in danger.

The main supporting cast includes:



[Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine](#) as Freddy Fasano, a fry cook at Coop's Fried Chicken, who may be one of the two arsonists. His halting speech and creepy overall demeanor lead to some bullying at work and being turned down when he interviews for a potential promotion (which is the final straw in his season-long breakdown). The arsonist is so difficult to catch because there is no pattern to his



crimes. He chooses random strangers who appear to be happy (even seeing a couple laughing in a bar is enough to set him off). He then follows them to see where they live, and burns their house to the ground with them and their families inside.



[Hannah Emily Anderson](#) as Ashley Gudsen, Dave's third wife. [Luke Roessler](#) is Emmett, Ashley's teenage son and Dave's stepson. Through Dave's interaction with his family, we start to see that he has a darker side. His painted on smile has occasional cracks before he quickly returns to his "everything is fine" demeanor.



[John Leguizamo](#) is excellent as supposed slimeball, Ezra Esposito, an alcoholic and former Columbia Metro Police detective who used to work with Dave. He believes Dave framed him and ruined his career. He's the only one who believes Michelle, and helps her investigate Dave.



[Greg Kinnear](#) as Commander Harvey Englehart, chief of the Umlerland Fire Department, and Dave's good friend. He sees Dave as a hero, and initially refuses to believe he has anything to do with setting fires.



[Anna Chlumsky](#) as Special Agent Dawn Hudson, and ATF agent brought in to assist with the arson investigations.

No word yet on a potential second season. While both arson cases are solved, there are enough loose ends to justify another season, although it would be a completely different show.

## #26

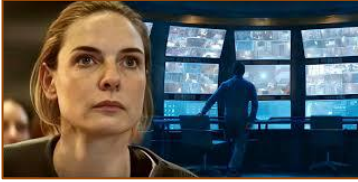


### **Silo** – season 2 ([Apple TV+](#)) (May 2023, Nov. 2024)

In the terrific first season, we are introduced to the self-contained world of the Silo. Based on the popular book series by [Hugh Howey](#), the series is set in a dystopian future, where roughly 10,000 citizens, supposedly the last of humankind, live in a giant bunker called the Silo that extends 144 stories underground. No one knows who built the Silo, why they all live there, or what happened to make the outside world's atmosphere poisonous and unlivable.

The residents have been told that all historical records of “the before times” were destroyed 140 years ago during a rebel uprising that was put down by the Founders, who created the rules everyone lives by today. Of course, anyone familiar with this type of series will figure that those historical records secretly exist somewhere.

There are some themes that will resonate in today's world – a societal lockdown keeping people stuck in a confined space, the central government decides what history can be taught, the Judicial division controls who can marry and who should and should not have children (women need to receive permission to have birth-control implants removed), and the use of sophisticated disinformation campaigns and deep-fake digital images to keep the populace unaware of what's really going on.



It is illegal to own (or look for) any artifacts, relics, or information from the time before the Silo was built. Any public dissent is a punishable offense. There are windows throughout the Silo showing the devastated landscape outside. People see lights in the sky at night but have no concept of stars or other planets. Someone finds old Pez dispensers and has no idea what they are. Knowledge of the outside world or anything before the Silo was built are virtually non-existent.

There is a book of laws and rules written by the Founders called the Pact, listing the many regulations all citizens must adhere to. Most residents of the Silo believe these rules are meant to protect them, but they are really designed to keep them ignorant and under control. It's similar to a constitution, but has two mysterious prohibitions.



The first is that no mechanical form of transportation is allowed. While the technology exists to build lifts to move people and supplies, they are forbidden. With no elevators, escalators, or even pulleys, traveling from the top levels (called the “Up Top”) to the lowest levels (called the “Deep Down”) is arduous and time consuming – most residents never journey more than a level or two from where they were raised. This creates segregation and social division between levels.



The second is that no magnification beyond a certain power is permitted. This serves to maintain the limited knowledge of the Silo residents, and hinders any real scientific or medical advancement. More powerful magnification levels might also enable someone to discover what is actually outside the Silo, which the powers that be want to remain hidden.





There is one over-arching and immutable rule – don't ask to leave the Silo. If you do, you are forced to go outside. Once you utter the words (and someone hears you), you can't take it back. No one who has ventured outside the Silo has ever returned. The residents believe that going outside the Silo means quick and certain death.

The Pact's mantra is recited by the Mayor whenever someone is exiled to the outside, "*We do not know why we are here. We do not know who built the Silo. We do not know why everything outside the Silo is as it is. We do not know when it will be safe to go outside. We only know that day is not today.*"



The windows and screens throughout the Silo show the barren outside landscape, which includes the bodies of those who tried to leave (they are just left where they collapsed and died). But do these images show an accurate picture? There are a few who believe the mysterious and powerful Judicial division is lying to the residents and showing fake scenes of the outside world, so they can maintain control of the population. As one person asks, "What if everything you know to be true, everything you've been told by the people you love, was in fact just one big lie?"



You might start out thinking you've seen this all before, but as **season 1** progresses, you soon realize you haven't. [Silo](#) has its own unique voice, complex themes, intersecting story arcs, and surprising twists. By the end of episode four, no less than four of the main characters we've been introduced to and expect to lead the series (since they are recognizable stars) are gone. We don't meet the show's main ongoing protagonist until the second episode.

Season 2 doesn't quite live up to the compelling first season, but it's still good – particularly the last few episodes. And it sets up a potentially exciting third season. Here are some of the main characters and their stories.



[Rebecca Ferguson](#) is riveting as Juliette Nichols, the Silo's best engineer, who initially works in one of the lower levels. When we first meet her, she is performing a dangerous and unprecedented maneuver to fix the main generator, which is on the verge of being irrevocably damaged. If not fixed, it would endanger virtually everyone in the Silo.

Juliette's ingenuity and bravery leads the departing sheriff ([David Oyelowo](#)) to recommend her as his replacement. She reluctantly takes the job and discovers a long-standing conspiracy that puts her in constant danger. She's not sure who's involved, who knows the truth, or whom she can trust.



In **season 1**, Juliette is investigating a murder, and discovers that there is a secret group dedicated to remembering the past, whose members are being systematically killed. Those in charge of the Silo see Juliette as a major threat, and conspire to have her exiled to the outside (where she would presumably die).

But when people see Juliette walking outside and going over a hill, rather than collapsing and dying as everyone else had, rumors start to spread that she might still be alive. This makes many residents start to think they've been lied to. A potential rebellion starts brewing.



Juliette spends all of **season 2** outside, where she discovers that there are dozens of other Silos. In a flashback, we see that the inhabitants of Silo 17 revolt and escape (and die when they get outside). Juliette breaks into Silo 17 by climbing over the dead bodies scattered by the entrance. She meets “Solo” ([Steve Zahn](#)) a man who has locked himself in a vault and claims to be the only survivor of the Silo 17 rebellion. He tells her that there are actually 50 Silos, and her escape might cause a revolution. She is determined to get back to her Silo and let everyone know she is still alive.

This is one of the main problems with the new season. While her dangerous adventure is compelling, the various other stories taking place in the Silo have to proceed without her. She was by far the best thing about season 1, and there is no equally charismatic presence to replace her in the Silo.

Here are the other main players:



[Tim Robbins](#) is good as always, playing Bernard Holland, the by-the-book head of the Silo’s IT department, who may be more powerful (and more aware of what’s really going on) than he initially seems. It’s not clear (until it is) whether he is Juliette’s ally or adversary. In season 2, Benard knows that Juliette’s potential survival threatens everything he stands for, and tries to convince the populace that she is dead. He will do anything to maintain the status quo and eliminate anyone he sees as a potential threat.



Hip-hop artist, [Common](#), is sinisterly emotionless as Robert Sims, the head of Judicial security known as raiders, and responsible for keeping order in the Silo. In season 1, he is part of a surveillance team that monitors Juliette’s movements. [Alexandria Riley](#) is Camille, a former raider who is now Robert’s wife and



mother of their son. In season 2, Bernard promotes him to Judge, but Robert and Camille become suspicious of Bernard's motives and consider joining the rebellion.



**Lain Glen** is Dr. Peter Nichols, an obstetrician and Juliette's father – they have been estranged since she was a teenager. Juliette's brother had a heart condition, and her surgeon mother secretly built a magnifying device that would help her operate on him. But Judicial found out and intervened. Her brother died and her mom committed suicide. Juliette always believed her father informed on her mother, but when she became sheriff, she had access to the files that showed he had nothing to do with it. They reconcile shortly before she leaves the Silo.



**Harriet Walter** is Martha Walker, an electrical engineer who works in the lower levels of the Silo. She has been a parental figure for Juliette. In season 2, Bernard has her ex-wife imprisoned to use as leverage to get her to provide information on the rebellion.



**Chinaza Uche** is Paul Billings, a by-the-book former Judicial administrator who becomes chief deputy under Juliette (but she doesn't know if she can trust him). In season 2, Billings, now the sheriff, finds evidence that Juliette was betrayed and never requested to go outside.



**Avi Nash** is Lukas Kyle, a systems analyst in the IT department who is curious about the outside world. Bernard tasks him with deciphering a coded letter found on a hard drive, which may contain information about the Silo's origins and previous rebellions.



Steve Zahn is “Solo,” the only survivor of the Silo 17 rebellion. Juliette encounters him when she breaks into Silo 17. He has locked himself in a vault, and initially refuses to open the door. She persuades him to help her get back to her Silo. She starts to suspect there might be others alive in Silo 17.



[Geraldine James](#) is Ruth Jahns, the Silo’s elected mayor, who is loved by the residents of the Silo. She’s one of the few who walks from top to bottom to meet her constituents. She has a secret relationship with sheriff deputy, Sam Marnes ([Will Patton](#)). Both butts heads with the Judicial division, which sees the two’s popularity among the public as a threat to their authority.



[David Oyelowo](#) and [Rashida Jones](#) are the sheriff (before Juliette), Holston Becker, and his wife Allison, who works in the IT department. Allison believes the outside world is not as toxic as the Judicial division would have everyone believe. She decides to go outside and seek answers – Holston later follows suit, and recommends that Juliette replace him as sheriff.



The season finale contains a thrilling cliffhanger that places both Juliette and Bernard in severe danger. But that’s not the last scene. We flashback to a time before the Silos that hints at what might have happened to the outside world. I won’t give away what happens, but it’s a great way to end season 2. Both the third and fourth seasons, which were filmed back-to-back, have been completed, with season 3 slated for early 2026.

## #25



### Zero Day (Netflix)

Feb. 2025

[Robert De Niro](#) leads a strong ensemble cast in this scary political thriller that might resonate with more than a few viewers. As the series opens, a cyber-attack, using technology

that seems far beyond U.S. capability, strikes every electronic device and platform across the country. The disruption to the energy grid, as well as telecommunication and transportation networks, lasts for just one minute, but the resulting catastrophes, including a train crash, cause more than 3,400 deaths. It's immediately followed by a cryptic message that appears on everyone in the country's smartphones, that this is "just the beginning." This becomes known as *Zero Day*.



As the public and the news media start to panic, blame firmly lands on the Russians. But could it be domestic terrorism or something even more nefarious? President Evelyn Mitchell ([Angela Bassett](#)) establishes the Zero Day Commission, which is given unprecedented powers, such as

arresting and holding people without warrants, using enhanced interrogation, and other otherwise illegal methods, to find and stop the perpetrators.

President Mitchell appoints George Mullen ([Robert De Niro](#)), a popular former president (and her immediate predecessor), who did not run for a second term for unspecified personal reasons, to head up the commission. He's the one person everybody seems to trust (initially, at least).





Personal entanglements collide with political maneuvering, as Mullen gets closer to finding out who was behind the attack. Tension mounts as powerful forces will stop at nothing, including murder, to keep the truth from coming out. All this plays out as Mullen is under a deadline to get answers before the president is forced to retaliate against Russia.

The stellar cast includes



[Lizzie Caplan](#) as Alexandria Mullen, estranged daughter of George Mullen – she’s a Congresswoman from New York, was opposed to her father’s appointment, and is now a ranking member of the Zero Day Commission Oversight Committee. [Matthew Modine](#) as Richard Dreyer, Speaker of the House and vocal critic of George Mullen and President Mitchell.



[Jesse Plemons](#) as Roger Carlson, George Mullen’s personal aide, an experienced but troubled political operative. [Connie Britton](#) as Valerie Whitesell, Mullen’s former White House Chief of Staff, who is brought in to be his chief of staff for the Zero Day Commission – she had a not-so-secret affair with George Mullen when he was president.



[Joan Allen](#) as Shela Mullen, former first lady who is nominated for a judgeship on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals.



[Dan Stevens](#) as Evan Green, a popular far-right political commentator and TV host who is one of George Mullen's most outspoken and radical critics.



[Clark Gregg](#) as Robert Lyndon, a Wall Street billionaire and political influencer, who seems to know who might be behind the attack and will use his extensive resources and criminal contacts to stop Mullen and his commission from completing their mission and publishing their findings.



[Gaby Hoffmann](#) as Monica Kidder, a Silicon Valley tech mogul and CEO, who's the subject of a Congressional anti-trust hearing, and may know something about who is behind the attack.



[Bill Camp](#) as CIA Director Jeremy Lasch – we don't know who's side he's on until the very end.

[Zero Day](#) was created to be a limited series, so there is no second season.

## #24



### Star Trek: Strange New Worlds – season 3 (Par.+)

May. 2022, June 2023, July 2025

This series chronicles the 23<sup>rd</sup> century five-year mission of Captain Christopher Pike's *Starship Enterprise*, in the years immediately preceding Captain James T. Kirk and the original

*Star Trek* series. [Anson Mount](#), [Ethan Peck](#), and [Rebecca Romijn](#) reprise their roles from the second season of *Star Trek: Discovery* as Captain Christopher Pike, science officer Lt. Spock, and second in command Number One ( Lt. Commander Una-Chin-Riley), respectively.

Those familiar with the original series know that James T. Kirk took over command of the *Enterprise* after Christopher Pike suffered a catastrophic injury. This is addressed upfront, in **season 1** as Pike is given a glimpse into the future and becomes aware of his eventual “potential” fate. It will occur seven years from when this series begins, which gave the show room for several more seasons. It's been renewed through season 5, which coincides with the *Enterprise*'s “five-year mission.”



There are numerous references to the original series, with storylines that enhance *Star Trek* lore and provide richness for fans by providing more in-depth backstories to characters and events from that time. This includes Spock before he had complete control of his emotions, his

budding “friendship” with Nurse Chapel ([Jess Bush](#)), and his Vulcan betrothed, T'Pol ([Gia Sandhu](#)), to whom he was bonded as a child.





In the original pilot, which was rejected by NBC as being too cerebral, (parts of the unaired pilot were used in the original series episode, *The Cage*) the Enterprise had a female first officer referred to only as Number One. Here, she is given a name and a backstory.



We see a young Lieutenant James T. Kirk ([Paul Wesley](#)), a decade before he was promoted to Captain of the *USS Enterprise*, and before he became friends with Spock (their relationship takes a leap forward in season 3). While Kirk is not part of the regular crew, he appears in several episodes.

There are many other character shout-outs to [Star Trek](#) history.



Here, Nyota Uhura ([Celia Rose Gooding](#)) is a young, insecure cadet, well before she became the confident Starfleet officer *Trek* fans have come to know and love.



Captain Kirk's brother, Lt. George Samuel "Sam" Kirk ([Dan Jeannotte](#)), who is only seen in one episode of the original series, is a regular crew member on Christopher Pike's *Enterprise*.



Security Chief Lt. La'an Noonien-Singh ([Christina Chong](#)) is a descendent of the most well-known [Star Trek](#) villain, Khan Noonien Singh (played by [Ricardo Montalban](#) in both the original series and the theatrical film, [Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan](#)).



[Babs Olusanmoku](#) plays Joseph M'Benga, chief medical officer, who has had many brutal war-time experiences in his secret past as a Starfleet special forces operative before joining the *Enterprise*. His character also appeared in a couple of episodes of the original series.



In season 3, we are introduced to a young Lieutenant junior grade Montgomery "Scotty" Scott ([Martin Quinn](#)), the only survivor of a Gorn attack on his ship, the *USS Stardiver*. He, of course, eventually becomes chief engineer of the *Enterprise* under James T. Kirk.

Other key cast members original to this series include:



[Melissa Navia](#) as helmsman Erica Ortega, a hotshot pilot and soldier, who has quickly become a favorite among *Trek* fans. Her catchphrase is, "I'm Erica Ortega. I fly the ship."



[Carol Kane](#) as Commander Pelia, the new chief engineer – a centuries old member of an alien species called Lanthanites (who apparently have secretly blended in with humans on Earth for thousands of years). It turns out that Commander Pelia was one of Scotty's professors at Starfleet Academy.



[Melanie Scrofano](#) as Marie Batel, a Starfleet captain of the *USS Cayuga* and Pike's on-again, off-again romantic interest. She was infected by the Gorn and the *Enterprise* crew tries to save her before she undergoes a potentially tragic transformation.

The writing and acting in **season 2** is even better than the excellent first season, adeptly mixing elements of comedy, drama, horror, and fantasy. It was smart to shift some of the focus away from Captain Pike and more toward the ensemble of great characters.



The *Subspace Rhapsody* musical episode could have been goofy, but instead is clever, surprisingly poignant, and the perfect way to provide resolution to several ongoing storylines.



Equally impressive is the crossover episode with characters from the animated *Star Trek: Lower Decks*, which they pulled off brilliantly, as Lower Decks ensigns Brad Boimler ([Jack Quaid](#)) and Beckett Mariner ([Tawny Newsome](#)) are sent by a temporal anomaly from their 25<sup>th</sup> century to the live-action 23<sup>rd</sup> century *USS Enterprise*. In turn, the *Enterprise* crew appears animated at the end of the episode.

**Season 3** is more action packed than the first two seasons, as the crew battles the Gorn faces a powerful unknown attacker, and has to venture into disputed Klingon space.



One of the best nods to the original series takes place in episode 6. When the *USS Farragut*, where Lieutenant James Kirk is second in command, is attacked by a massive unidentified ship and its captain is injured, Kirk is forced to become temporary captain. As the *Enterprise* arrives to rescue the surviving crew, they are attacked by the same mysterious ship that disabled the *Farragut*. “Captain” Kirk, in his first command situation, has to figure out how to proceed, and give orders to a new crew that doubts his leadership ability – Spock, Scotty, Uhura, and Nurse Chapel (all of whom will be key officers under his command when he becomes captain of the *Enterprise*).





While Kirk is not yet comfortable in the Captain's chair, as demonstrated by his combination of bravado and uncertainty, we see an inkling of what's to come as his future crew, facing an unknown and seemingly unbeatable threat, starts to exhibit the traits fans have come to know from [Star Trek](#), the original series. With Spock giving him counsel, Kirk makes some bold decisions – both hallmarks of the original series.

It would be great if this was a prelude to a new series once [Strange New Worlds](#) comes to an end. The early days of James T. Kirk's *Enterprise*, before the events of the original series, would be fascinating, and would definitely draw an audience.



There are also several nods to other previous [Star Trek](#) series that viewers of those shows will appreciate. For non-[Trek](#) fans, it's just an exhilarating sci-fi series that might make them want to check out other [Star Trek](#) series (all available on Paramount+).



The finale is a satisfying end to the season, and seems like it was designed to be the series finale had the show not been renewed. In it Captain Batel gives Pike the gift of seeing the life (and memories of raising a family and growing old together) they could have had if she did not become a cosmic entity known as the Beholder (you have to watch the episode), and he avoided the terrible fate that he and [Star Trek](#) fans know awaits him. It's particularly bittersweet since he knows what's coming.

As already mentioned, the show has been renewed for seasons 4 and 5 (which will be its last).

## #23



### **The Night Agent** – season 2 ([Netflix](#)) (Mar. 2023, Jan. 2025)

In **season 1**, FBI agent Peter Sutherland ([Gabriel Basso](#)) foils a plot to blow up a DC Metro train. As a reward, White House Chief of Staff Diane Farr ([Hong Chau](#)) offers him a position working in the basement of the White House as the secret Night Action telephone operator – his job is to answer calls from covert agents in emergency need of help. It is extremely rare that the phone actually rings.

One day, he answers a call from a woman named Rose ([Luciane Buchanan](#)), a cybersecurity expert, who says her aunt and uncle told her to call this number – they are being attacked by intruders who entered their home. Apparently they are spies, and she overhears them discussing their mission. They believe there's a mole in the White House and they can't trust anyone.

Peter arrives too late to help his fellow spies, but just in time to help Rose escape. They both go into hiding and try to uncover the truth, with the assassins who killed her aunt and uncle hot on their trail.

As the season progresses, a deadly conspiracy unfolds, with top-level members of the president's ([Kari Matchett](#)) administration planning a bombing and assassination, and eliminating anyone who threatens their exposure. [Christopher Shyer](#) is excellent as the Vice President with his own agenda.



Season 1 includes a fun love story between the two assassins, Dale ([Phoenix Raei](#)) the hardcore professional hitman, and his gleefully brutal partner, Ellen ([Eve Harlow](#)), as they relentlessly pursue our heroes. They think nothing of torturing and killing anyone who might have information to help them find Peter and Rose, and at the same time are wondering if they would make good parents as they think about starting a family of their own. It doesn't end well.



**Season 2**, gets underway 10 months after the season 1 finale. After Peter saved his life, the president had Peter promoted to full-fledged Night Action field agent, despite his new handler, Catherine Weaver ([Amanda Warren](#)) doubting his readiness.



While on a mission in Bangkok, Peter and his new partner, Alice ([Brittany Snow](#)), are compromised. Killers attack them at the extraction point. Peter escapes, refuses to return home as ordered, and goes into hiding. He tells Catherine he thinks someone in the program gave up their location, and he doesn't know who he can trust.



At the same time, Rose, now working at AdVerse, an AI marketing company, gets a mysterious call from an unknown man telling her Peter is in trouble. She contacts Catherine, who tells her Peter is AWOL. She manages to use AdVerse's facial recognition software on CCTV and social media to track Peter to New York City, where she joins him.





After Catherine reluctantly allows them to remain in the field, the action escalates as Peter and Rose try to find the leaked intel on an experimental chemical weapons program, while at the same time being pursued by hitmen. They receive help from Noor Teheri ([Arienne Mandi](#)), a New York based aide to the Iranian Ambassador to the U.N., who has heard rumors he is secretly meeting with someone from U.S. intelligence who is leaking intel. Noor wants political asylum and to get her family out of Iran (an extremely dangerous mission).



Other cast members include: [Fola Evans-Akingbola](#) and [D. B. Woodside](#) (season 1) as secret service agents assigned to protect the vice president's daughter ([Sarah Desjardins](#)), who get pulled into the investigation; [Louis Hartman](#) as Jacob Monroe, an illegal dealer of intelligence (season 2); [Berto Colon](#) as Solomon Vega, a former marine who works for Jacob and tries to kill Peter and Rose (season 2), [Keon Alexander](#) as Javad, head of security at the Iranian Mission in New York, who starts to suspect Noor is working with the Americans (season 2), and [Marwan Kenzari](#) as Sami Saidi, a Night Action agent and former Delta Force Sergeant, who is given 24 hours to extract Noor's family from Iran (season 2).

[The Night Agent](#) has been renewed for a third season.

## #22



### **Daredevil: Born Again** (Disney+)

Mar. 2025

[Charlie Cox](#) is back as Matt Murdock / Daredevil, lawyer by day, vigilante crimefighter by night, from Hell's Kitchen in New York City. The original [Daredevil](#), which aired for three seasons on

Netflix (2015-2018), still ranks among the best superhero series ever on television. It was Netflix's first show featuring one of Marvel's street-level heroes (Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, and Iron Fist, soon followed). It also introduced us to the violent vigilante anti-hero, Frank Castle, aka The Punisher. All the Netflix Marvel series moved to Disney+ in 2022.

The Daredevil character officially joined the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in 2021 with Charlie Cox's cameo as Matt Murdock in [Spider-Man: No Way Home](#). He subsequently appeared as Daredevil in the 2022 Disney+ TV series, [She Hulk: Attorney at Law](#). His highly anticipated return in his own Disney+ series disappointed some, but thrilled others. I found myself starting out as the former, but ending up firmly in the latter group.

As the series begins, a tragic event contributes to Matt Murdock deciding to give up his vigilante life and focus exclusively on seeking justice as an attorney. But he gradually reaches the point where he realizes he needs to put the mask on again to help save the city from the Kingpin.



Great heroes are often defined and elevated by great villains, and Wilson Fisk / Kingpin, central to both the Netflix and Disney+ [Daredevil](#) series, is one of Marvel's most sinister characters (in the comic books, he's a major nemesis of both Daredevil and Spider-Man). Bringing one of comicdom's most notorious bad guys to life is no easy task. But [Vincent D'Onofrio](#) manages to do it brilliantly.

A supposedly reformed Wilson Fisk gets elected mayor of New York City, and we gradually see his veneer of wanting to do good peeled away as he is really more brutally evil than ever (in the season finale he commits one of the most gruesome murders ever seen on television).



Having run his mayoral campaign on a platform of stopping crime and ridding the city of vigilantes, Fisk puts together an Anti-Vigilante Task Force (ATVF) made up of corrupt cops with reputations for violent arrests. The ATVF operates outside the law, reports directly to Fisk, and basically serves as his private army. Many of these bad cops have skull tattoos, the symbol used by The Punisher, whom they idolize and erroneously believe shares their views on how to clean up the streets.



In episode 4, Matt tracks down and confronts Frank Castle ([Jon Bernthal](#)), telling him he should take responsibility and do something about those who are misusing his Punisher symbol. A disheveled and weary Castle tells Matt he doesn't care and has no intention of getting involved – he then berates Daredevil for merely capturing, rather than killing, the criminal known as Bullseye, who murdered Matt's friend and former partner in the first episode. Frustrated, and still not willing to resume his Daredevil persona, Matt goes off on his own. This makes The Punisher the second Netflix Marvel hero to make his MCU debut on Disney+.





Fisk's wife Vanessa ([Ayelet Zurer](#)) ran his criminal organization when he was in prison and when recovering from the injuries suffered at the hands of Maya Lopez (in the Disney+ series [Echo](#)). She can be just as ruthless as her husband.



Karen Page (the wonderful [Deborah Ann Woll](#)), Matt Murdock's former legal assistant, reporter, and then partner at his law firm, (and something more than just a friend), was the heart and soul of the original [Daredevil](#) series (and also had a key role in [The Punisher](#)). She appears in the first episode, along with Foggy Nelson ([Elden Henson](#)), whose tragic fate drives much of the plot forward. We don't see her again until the season finale, when she calls Frank Castle and asks him to help protect Matt (whom Fisk has ordered his AVTF to hunt down and kill).



Later, a group of AVTF officers approach Castle, asking him to join them. He refuses and a deadly fight ensues. But there are too many of them and he is overwhelmed and captured. He's held prisoner by Fisk, along with another vigilante known as the Swordsman, and other dissidents, as Fisk declares martial law and outlaws vigilantism. As the season ends, Castle is on the verge of escaping.



Matt tells Karen (who will fortunately have a much bigger role in season 2) that the only way to defeat Fisk and save the city is to recruit their own army – which includes honest cops (and others). This, of course, has fueled fan speculation that the other New York City based vigilantes might show up next season. [Krysten Ritter](#) who has as long been rumored to be joining the MCU, announced at the Disney upfront this past May that she will indeed be reprising her Jessica Jones

character in season 2. There is also a planned special presentation of *The Punisher* series set to premiere alongside season 2 of *Daredevil: Born Again* (which will debut in March, 2026).

Other notable cast members include:



**William Bethel** as Benjamin “Dex” Poindexter, aka Bullseye, a former FBI agent, now a psychopathic assassin and expert marksman. He has the ability to use virtually any object as a lethal projectile. Vanessa hires him to kill Foggy Nelson. He has a past with Wilson Fisk, and plans to kill him as well.



**Kamar de los Reyes** as Hector Ayala / White Tiger, a vigilante whose enhanced powers come from a mystical amulet. He's wrongfully accused of murdering a cop, for which Matt defends him in court and gets him acquitted. He's later killed by a member of Fisk's task force.



**Camila Rodriguez** as Angela del Toro, Hector's niece – in the comic books, she inherits Hector's amulet and becomes the new White Tiger (so maybe we'll see her as part of Daredevil's “army” in season 2).



**Tony Dalton** as Jack Duquesne / Swordsman, a wealthy socialite who is also a sword-wielding vigilante. He's captured and imprisoned by Fisk, along with Frank Castle. Swordsman seems like a sure thing to join Castle

when he escapes. His character was also in the Hawkeye TV series. His first comic book appearance was in *Avengers #19* in 1965.



[Margarita Levieva](#) as Heather Glenn, a therapist and Matt's current love interest – she is unaware that Matt is Daredevil, and does not approve of vigilantes, seeing them as no different from the criminals they fight. Fisk and Vanessa attend couples therapy sessions with Heather, who refuses to believe Fisk is as bad as Matt claims.



[Hunter Doohan](#) as Bastian Cooper / Muse, a masked serial killer who makes art with the blood of his victims. He is one of Heather's patients, and is obsessed with her.



[Mohan Kapur](#) as Tusaf Khan, a bank manager who denies Matt a loan for his struggling law firm. Tusaf happens to be the father of Kamala Khan, aka Ms. Marvel. He's disappointed that Matt has never heard of her. When criminals barge in to rob the bank, Matt manages to defeat them just as the police arrive. Murdock then accepts an invitation to have dinner with Khan's family (could Ms. Marvel also join Daredevil's army?).



Season 2 of *[Daredevil: Born Again](#)* promises to ramp up the action as Daredevil recruits a team of heroes to battle the Kingpin's forces. We already know that will include The Punisher, Jessica Jones, and The Swordsman. While there has been no official mention of Luke Cage's entry into the MCU, [Mike Colter](#), the actor who plays him, appeared with [Charlie Cox](#) and [Krysten Ritter](#) at this year's New York Comic Con in October.



## #21



### **The Bear** – season 4 ([Hulu](#))

June 2022, June 2023, June 2024, June 2025

[Jeremy Allen White](#) is fantastic as Carmen “Carmy” Berzatto a brilliant, young James Beard Award-winning chef. After being immersed for years in the world of fine dining, and working in

some of the best restaurants in the world, he comes home to Chicago to run his family’s struggling Italian beef sandwich shop. His brother Mikey (played in flashbacks by [Jon Bernthal](#)) committed suicide and leaves Carmy the restaurant in his will.

The writers, cast, and film crew do a remarkable job of making you feel the hectic pace of the back-of-house staff and the overwhelming stress of the kitchen’s claustrophobic environment, helped along by a ticking clock and pulse-pounding soundtrack.

*The Bear* that can be intensely stressful, but also funny, dramatic, thought-provoking, exhilarating, and addicting – and unlike anything else on television.

Before getting to the latest season, here’s a brief recap of the first three (which you need to watch before season 4). Season’s 1 and 2 were brilliant, with the latter topping my list (the first season ranked 4<sup>th</sup> overall). The third season was not bad, but was nowhere near the high level of the first two seasons. Season 4 rebounded, but is still not as great as the first two.



In season 1, Carmy and his newly hired young sous chef, Sydney ([Ayo Edebiri](#) in a standout performance), who is brimming with innovative ideas, have to deal with a set-in-their-ways kitchen staff, who initially resist efforts to modernize the restaurant.



Before Carmy arrived, Mikey's stubborn, obnoxious best friend Richie ([Ebon Moss-Bachrach](#)) was temporarily running things. He and Sydney are as different as night and day, which leads to their bumping heads through much of the first season. Their conflict is one of the more interesting aspects of the show. Richie is loud, abrasive, used to settling disputes with his fists, and seemingly has no emotional depth (until we discover he actually does). Sydney is calm, restrained, efficient, and solves disputes through reason and compromise – but there's something bubbling under the surface, and you almost expect her to explode at any moment.

As the staff starts to see the results of their labors, and Carmy and Sydney's unrelenting confidence, staff members are gradually won over. They include:



[Liza Colon-Zayas](#) as Tina, the wary prep cook, reluctant to make any changes, and resentful of having to take direction from a young upstart – she's gradually won over by Sydney's cooking skills and persistent efforts to make things run more smoothly.



[Lionel Boyce](#) as Marcus, the restaurant's creative baker, who is constantly adding artistic flair to his scrumptious desserts.



[Edwin Lee Gibson](#) as Ebraheim, the sturdy, unflappable line cook, whom we discover survived the Somali civil war (so nothing that happens in the kitchen can rattle him).



[Matty Matheson](#) is Neil Fak, the genial handyman and childhood friend of the Berzattos, who doesn't officially work there, but finds his services constantly needed. [Matheson](#) is also one of the executive producers. A real-life chef and restaurateur, he is also an advisor for the show.



[Abby Elliott](#) is Carmy's sister Natalie "Sugar" Berzatto, with whom he has a complicated relationship – they have completely different ways of dealing with their brother's death. She eventually comes on board to do the books and help straighten out their finances.



**Season 2** is extraordinary, and may be even better than the first season. The tension ramps up higher than ever as Carmy and his staff close the sandwich shop and have to completely renovate the old space, get all the licenses and permits, design a menu, and open a new high-end restaurant – all in 18 months or they lose everything.



Uncle Cicero ([Oliver Platt](#)) invests \$500K in the project with the proviso that if they don't open in 18 months, he gets the entire property. This puts Carmy and Sydney under incredible stress. Everything seems at once on the verge of either triumphant success or catastrophic failure. Adding to the tension is the fact that numerous Chicago restaurants have recently been driven out of business due to the pandemic.





A number of season 2 episodes are devoted to individual staff members, as Carmy sends them to learn from some of his former colleagues. They each gain a new perspective, which helps them work through their own issues. All are fascinating and extremely well done, and provide insights into each character's motivations, insecurities, and true talents. Particularly good, is when Richie works for a week shadowing the staff at a top-tier restaurant, where he meets Chef Terry ([Olivia Colman](#)), who runs the place. She changes his entire perspective with a casual chat, while showing him how to peel mushrooms (an extremely delicate task). They all return with their passions renewed and determined to succeed.



[Molly Gordon](#) is excellent as Claire Dunlap, who Carmy starts dating. She was a childhood friend of the Berzattos, on whom Carmy had a crush as a teenager. Now, he sees her as distracting his attention from the restaurant, which requires his full-time focus.



There are some wonderful cameo performances, most notably the remarkable [Jamie Lee Curtis](#) (seen in a flashback episode) as Carmy, Mikey, and Natalie's loudly alcoholic mother, and [Bob Odenkirk](#) as their mean "uncle" Lee,

Everything comes to fruition in the season 2 finale, as everyone is put to the test preparing for the new restaurant's opening.



**Season 3** seems like a step back (or sideways), and feels unfinished, like there should have been two or three more episodes. The focus on individual cast members' backstories provides some insights into events that shaped who they are today, but the overall narrative that propelled the previous seasons forward is missing. Much of the humorous interactions among the main players has been relegated to secondary characters. I guess my real problem with season 3 is that it's simply not as enjoyable as the first two.



We flash back to Carry's training as a premier chef, when he is mercilessly abused and traumatized by executive chef David Fields ([Joel McHale](#)). In present day, when Carry finally confronts him, there is no real emotional payoff. Now Carry becomes borderline abusive of his own staff, in his fruitless pursuit of perfection, which includes changing the menu every day. This only adds to the stress everyone is already feeling as the new restaurant opens and they await what could be a make-or-break review from a well-known food critic.

Perhaps this encapsulates the mixed reactions this season seems to have generated among fans of the show. Whereas in each of the first two seasons my wife and I liked the same things, this season the episodes we liked and disliked were markedly different (and for the first time there were episodes we both disliked).



There's an episode devoted entirely to Carry's sister Natalie going into labor and having her baby – with her troubled and grating mom by her side (again, brilliantly played by [Jamie Lee Curtis](#)). I found this episode to be one of the least appealing of the season, but my wife thought it was one of the best and most insightful.



**Season 4** is back on track, combining some of the best elements of the previous two seasons. While not living up to the impossibly high standards set by seasons 1 and 2, this season is still solid. The focus on the chefs' personal lives and anxieties more than the cooking and chaos of the kitchen works because of viewer familiarity and comfort with the characters (and the great writing and acting).

Carmy realizes he has been an a\$\$hole, with his narrow-minded and tyrannical pursuit of perfection leading to a decidedly mixed *Chicago Tribune* restaurant review, a disgruntled kitchen staff, and the ruination of his relationship with Claire.



To make matters worse, and considerably more stressful, Cicero gives them two months to achieve a miraculous turnaround or the restaurant will have to close. Cicero places a clock in the kitchen counting down the hours to this deadline. Carmy and Sydney commit to earning a Michelin star, which may be the only way to avoid disaster.



As Carmy apologizes to his staff and to Claire for ruining everything last season (it almost seems as if he's apologizing to the audience as well), virtually all the major cast members are trying to shed, or at least deal with, their emotional baggage, and figure out how to keep going and where that might lead – both personally and professionally.





Struggling with budget cuts and the kitchen staff's weariness from constantly changing the menu, Carmy and Sydney begin simplifying dishes using fewer ingredients, and creating a set menu. Carmy praises Sydney's efforts and admits to her that changing the menu every day was selfish and detrimental to the restaurant.

Sydney is seriously considering an offer to become a partner and head chef at a new rival restaurant currently under construction. In the midst of all this, Sydney's father has a heart attack – she rushes to the hospital in a panic, but Claire (who's a medical resident) tells her he is recovering, and tries to assuage her guilt over making her father worry about her.



Ebraheim hires business consultant Albert Schnur ([Rob Reiner](#)) to mentor him on how to expand the Beef window, which is the only profitable part of the restaurant. Albert suggests franchising the Beef window, expanding to two or three additional locations.



The season ends with key decisions affecting Carmy's, Sydney's, and Richie's future with the restaurant, which sets up what is sure to be a fascinating fifth season.