



SIZZLING From left: Stefan Richter at L.A. Farm; Ilan Hall and Michael Voltaggio at the Grand Central Market downtown.

Toque Takeover!

Suddenly *Top Chef* alumni are on the front burner of L.A.'s dining scene | By Lesley Balla | Photography by Peden + Munk |

Throw a box of Cryovac sous-vide bags in any direction these days and you can't help but hit a *Top Chef* contestant. Local veterans of Bravo's cooking competition are all over the city—and, lately, coming to a collective boil.

In Pasadena, Michael Voltaggio, who won the show's latest cycle in December, is gaining acclaim as the new chef de cuisine at the Dining Room at the Langham Hotel, where he turns out dishes like halibut cheeks with scrambled cauliflower and lemongrass-scallion froth. Westside stalwart L.A. Farm has rebranded itself as Stefan's at L.A. Farm, so as to play up kitchen king Stefan Richter's season-five TV star power. And then there's season-two winner Ilan Hall, whose several-month-old Gorbals in downtown's Historic Core has amassed serious blogosphere buzz for its not-so-kosher Jewish-Scottish cuisine (think haggis burgers and bacon-wrapped matzo balls).

Many of these local chefs (including season three's Chris "CJ" Jacobson, who just took the reins at The Yard in SaMo, and Hall's cast mate Betty Fraser of Grub in Hollywood) admit that they went on the show for exposure—which has grown over the years, with an estimated three million viewers now tuning in each week. To some, it was merely a business decision. And to a few, it was strictly an opportunity for bragging rights: "I'm a competitive person, and I wanted to compete against my brother and other chefs," says Voltaggio, who just went head-to-head against his elder sibling, Bryan.

Indeed, *Top Chef* fans can—and do—fill up those two-tops. "I didn't see TV as a vehicle to drive success," says Richter's

fellow cast member, Fabio Viviani, who's now helming the new Firenze Osteria in NoHo. "But doing the show brought people into the restaurant." Adds Hall: "It helped establish myself on the L.A. scene. At the end of the day, it's all good publicity."

Even those who don't open up their own places see dividends. "Travel opportunities, cooking demonstrations, and private parties ended up happening," says season-two runner-up Marcel Vigneron, whose December 17 guest stint as part of Breadbar's popular Hatchi tasting menu series sold out far in advance. Still, such attention can be double-edged; Vigneron, until recently seen nightly in the open kitchen at The Bazaar on La Cienega (he's since left), claims that, if anything, his fame initially left his now-former boss José Andrés wary of hiring him: "I almost didn't get the job because of the show."

Of course, L.A.'s a great place to be cooking if you've still got stars in your eyes. Viviani and Richter have each filmed their own pilots (they remain close-lipped on details), and Vigneron is currently working on what he's calling a "reality docusoap about creativity, science, passion, teamwork, food and drink." Meanwhile, Antonia Lofaso, the season-four darling who was last seen working the stoves at WeHo's now-defunct Foxtail, recently partnered with Tyler Florence for *The Search for the Greatest American Recipe*, to air on Lifetime.

So, in the end, which matters more to these chefs: the cameras or their cuisine? "In five years, if I have 10 restaurants and no TV shows, I'd be a happy camper," says Viviani. "If I have five TV shows and no restaurants? I'll be a miserable rock star." ▣