

# Chef Tom Colicchio continues to work his craft

## ON THE RECORD

BY DAVID GIBBONS

Tom Colicchio insists he's just a regular guy from Elizabeth, N.J.—and his straight-talking, enthusiastic, jovial manner does nothing to dispel that notion. Yet he also possesses the bona fide credentials of a culinary superstar, including more than 25 years of critical acclaim cooking in some very famous Manhattan establishments, a string of highly successful restaurants under the Craft brand he created, a quiver-full of stars from “The New York Times,” three James Beard awards, two cookbooks and a lead role in the Bravo Network TV show titled “Top Chef.” Recently, Colicchio sat down with Chelsea Now at Craftsteak, the West 15th Street outpost of his far-flung empire, which includes venues in Las Vegas and Dallas and plans for openings in both Los Angeles and Atlanta within the next year. He offered glimpses into his philosophy and reflections on the busy life of a talented chef turned restaurant mogul.

### When and how did you first learn to cook? Who taught you?

I spent some time with my mother and grandmother, but I really taught myself from books, especially Jacques Pèpin's “La Technique.”

### When did you decide you wanted to be a chef?

When I was about 16. My dad suggested it—he knew I really liked food—and it was one of the few times I actually listened to him. At first, he thought I should become a baker because he felt it was so hard to get good bread.

### What was the big turning point in your path to success?

My first [executive] chef job in New York was at a restaurant called Mondrian. I was 26 and received a three-star review.

### What are the keys to your cooking philosophy?

It's all about sourcing and buying great products. You can't take lousy products and make good food. The other thing, if you really want to become a successful chef, is to get rid of the recipes and learn how to cook. If you can cook without following recipes, you'll be able to walk into a greenmarket, a supermarket, a farmstand, wherever it is, choose the best ingredients, go home and cook. Take the analogy of a musician. You can do covers all your life and that's as far as you'll go. But if you start writing your own songs, then maybe you have a chance at a real career. It's the same thing with cooking: You don't need to follow someone else's ideas of what food should be.

### What are some of your signature dishes?

I don't have any. That's because the food we do is so seasonal. A signature dish is something you'd have to leave on the menu too long.

### Some of your favorite foods?

Hmm, well...I can tell you my least favorite: Okra. I hate it.

### Because of that mucus-like texture on the inside?



Chelsea Now photo by David Gibbons

### Tom Colicchio

Exactly. My favorite food? Mushrooms.

### Favorite chefs? Favorite restaurants?

[Laughs] That's impossible to answer. You end up leaving too many people out.

### Favorite kitchen tool?

A sharp knife.

### Ideal meal?

Nowadays something light, with a lot of courses. I prefer to eat smaller courses with really flavorful dishes.

### Who are your influences/mentors?

Obviously Jacques Pèpin is a big influence on my cooking career, since I taught myself from his books, but I don't really have a mentor.

### When and how did you begin the transformation from talented chef at a famous restaurant to mini-mogul with a string of restaurants?

I don't know. Sometimes I think I need to have my head examined. It's like walking. You take one step at a time and, before you know it, you're opening a second restaurant. Then, before you know it, you have a bunch of them, and you ask yourself, “How did that happen?”

### Like that line in the Talking Heads song...

Right: “How did I get here?” The answer is I don't know!

### When and how did you open your Chelsea spot, Craftsteak?

In fact, Craftsteak was supposed to open up in midtown and the deal fell through. Just then, I got a phone call, through a broker, from the owner of this building saying he had a restaurant space available for me, and that Joseph [Bastianich] and Mario [Batali] were doing a restaurant here [Del Posto]. Would I be interested in

opening a steakhouse? I took a look and decided it was a great place to do it. I can look out of either my living room or my bedroom window and see this restaurant from my house.

### What do you think of the neighborhood?

I live in it, so I kind of like it.

### How's business?

Now it's great.

### What is your reaction to the recent “New York Times” review?

The two-star review? Much better than the first one we got. [Laughs] Yeah, the review was great. I'm glad that he [Frank Bruni] came back and re-reviewed us, and I think it was well-deserved. In fact, we really changed a lot from when we first opened the restaurant, including the chef.

### Are you okay with being called a “showboat”?

It's funny because I'm really not. Two years prior to doing the first season of [the current “Top Chef”] show, I was called by the same producer to do a different show. I said, “Absolutely not, I don't want to do TV.” I was very reluctant. They asked me to do a screen test, and I said no. I tried everything to get out of it. Finally, they came to me and said, “We really think you're the right person for it.”

### You made them want you more.

I eventually took a shot. I had no idea it was going to be this popular. I was really shocked by the whole thing. Showboat? I grew up in Elizabeth, N.J. My feeling is, I'm afraid one day this is all going to disappear. So, I just wake up every morning and say, “Aren't I lucky?” And then I get on with my day.

### What's it like to be a celebrity chef?

I don't know. I don't think about it much.

I just happen to be a guy who can cook a pretty good meal. If that gets you celebrity, then fine. It certainly isn't something I went searching for. When I started cooking 20 or 25—no 30—years ago, if someone had said, “You're going to have a bunch of restaurants, you're going to write cookbooks, and you're going to be on TV,” I would have laughed at them. I'm surprised by the whole thing. But if it helps put people in seats, that's good.

### How do you juggle all the tasks and responsibilities?

I have a great bunch of people who I surround myself with. Otherwise, it wouldn't happen.

### Do you know “Molto Mario” [Batali] very well?

Sure, I know Mario. We golf, and sometimes we hang out together. I tell you, he's great guy to hang out with, but sometimes I just can't keep up. If I try, I might end up getting myself in trouble.

### Do you ever compare notes? Is there any sort of rivalry or competition with his restaurant being right next door here?

I don't think so. The great thing about our industry is that it's competitive in the sense that we're out looking for the same diner. But we're not competitive with each other. We're each doing something very different here: He's doing Italian food; I'm doing steak. We also feel we feed off each other. If we do a great job, more people are going to come to this area. If it's competition, it's friendly competition. I have a lot of friends in this business. Alfred Portale's a good friend of mine; so is Thomas Keller. We're not competitive in a way where we knock each other, but we are to the point where we'll say, “How many covers did you do last night?” “Two-fifty.” “We did three hundred.” “Great.”