



Interviewed by
Cameron Keith
Gainer



■ Cameron Gainer: I was wondering if you could describe Bocuse d'Or for people who might not be familiar with what it is?

■ Gavin Kaysen: The easiest way to describe it is to say that it's the most prestigious international cooking competition held every other year in France, which brings together twenty-four different nations from around the world. In simple terms, you have one year to train, five hours and thirty-five minutes to compete, and eight bites to determine whether you're the best or not. I mean that's the pressure that's put on you.

■ Gainer: So as a coach for the 2015 Bocuse d'Or, you worked with Chef Philip Tessier, who's at The French Laundry, and Skylar Stover, his *commis*. How many days of competition are there?

■ Kaysen: It's two days. Twelve countries compete day one; twelve countries day two. There's a guy named Rasmus Kofoed who's competed for Denmark three times. He's an animal. He's won the silver, the bronze, and the gold.

■ Gainer: He's the only person who's medaled multiple times in competition.

■ Kaysen: Yeah. I competed against him in 2007, when he took silver. He took bronze in 2005, silver in 2007, took 2009 off and had a baby, and then he came back and won in 2011. And when he won, everyone asked him, how does it feel? And he said: It feels like I just got out of jail. I can finally move on from this in my life. This year he came up to me after the competition and said: If you guys had competed on day two, you would have won. Because when you go on day one, you're maybe the fastest one to ski down the mountain. But the judges know they have to watch twelve other people ski down the mountain. You can't go back and change the score. We lost first place by nine points. Nine points was the difference between 1st and 2nd, whereas eighty-seven points was the difference between 2nd and 3rd. That's a huge difference. But if you were to take the kitchen jury points that Norway received, which is 160, and you would have given those to the United States, and you would have given Norway what the United States got, which was 150, we would have won by a point. I mean the margin of error is so little when it's nine points. It's just one person, it's one judge.

■ Gainer: Taste, presentation, geographic representation, and kitchen skills. Those are the four categories?

■ Kaysen: Exactly.

■ Gainer: Are we at a

disadvantage in terms of geographic representation? When Philip and Skylar, who both work out in California, at The French Laundry, are competing, are they being judged with the understanding that they are working in Northern California? How are the judges thinking about what geographic representation is in the United States, a country that has so many different cooking styles?

■ Kaysen: If somebody thinks American, what do they think? Catsup, BBQ, maple syrup; if they think Northern California, they think wine, you know, and The French Laundry, because they're chefs, so they all know The French Laundry. And so we played that to our advantage. We've gone there before and we've done things that have BBQ sauce spices on it. We've not said that, but it had those spices. If you're a chef from Morocco and you've never tasted a BBQ sauce and ours is the first that you taste, what's your basis of comparison?

■ Gainer: It's interesting to look at the teams that recently competed. Philip and Skylar work at The French Laundry, while Chef Richard Rosendale and Corey Siegel, who competed in 2013, are from the South. In 2013 the strategy was autobiographical. You devised a narrative that played on Richard's history, growing up and cooking in the South.

■ Kaysen: Right. The hard part is that the food wasn't as driven in that direction as it should have been. I think that if the food had been more Southern, he would have had a better opportunity to place higher. You know, like with James, we really focused on New York, and Sag Harbor.

■ Gainer: This is Chef James Kent and Tom Allan, who competed in 2011. James is at Eleven Madison, and if I remember right, the dishes that you competed with were inspired by Manhattan on the one hand and Sag Harbor on the other, so the big city in contrast to the more local, small fishing town.

■ Kaysen: It's interesting because the Sag Harbor platter wasn't very strong. It was good, but it wasn't strong. The Manhattan platter had a really strong visual impact, so much so that even a couple of judges in this last cycle, in 2015, came up to me and said: Hey do you remember that Manhattan platter? That was so amazing! Which was interesting, because we thought it was amazing too. But we didn't realize the judges thought it was that amazing.

■ Gainer: This is where it becomes interesting in terms of the judging. We talked about the four categories, but it's also pretty clear that

in the more recent manifestations, the dishes and the platters coming out pay homage to art, architecture, and science, as much as they do to gastronomy. Are you seeing that shift year-to-year?

■ Kaysen: I think everybody wants to tell a story. I think with Bocuse d'Or, building the platter and building the program and building the strategy is also about building a story. What's the story that's going to get these two individuals who are cooking in that box for five-and-a-half hours motivated enough to turn around and produce the best food they can produce because they really believe in it? Because they really believe this is the best food they can do, not to mention the judges who taste the food and think: I can't taste food that's better than this right now. And nobody, out of the other twenty-three chefs, can produce something that's this good.

■ Gainer: That's interesting. I guess in terms of ingredients, too. There's so much training going on, leading up, and I'm thinking specifically about the year you competed originally—it was 2007 and you were competing with Brandon Rogers. He's in San Francisco, right?

■ Kaysen: Yes, he's the *chef de cuisine* at Benu, a great restaurant.

■ Gainer: When you competed, one of the ingredients was *poulet de Bresse*, which is a very specific chicken from a region in France that is categorized as *appellation d'origine contrôlée*, which means that it cannot leave.

■ Kaysen: You can't export it.

■ Gainer: You have to go there to work with it, and so you actually moved to Lyon to cook with this chicken.

■ Kaysen: Yeah we had to. And we worked at this little tiny charcuterie shop about 45 minutes outside of Paris. The thing that's interesting is the first time that we went to Paris and Lyon was in September; we worked with the bird when we were asked to come back again in November, because the maturity of the birds would change in those couple of months, and they suggested we see what would happen with the maturity level and how different then the skin was. I butchered more chickens in those two years than I have ever at any other time in my life, and I can tell you right now there's not one chicken in the United States of America that's treated as humanely as the *poulet de Bresse*. Ever. We have fat pockets and water pockets in our chicken. You can see the actual syringes going in and creating pockets of fat and water



clumps in our birds, and they do it because we sell our birds by weight. So if the bird weighs more, you get charged more money, even though it actually has no more mass on it whatsoever. All it is is pure fat, which as an American you're going to take off anyway, because we don't like the fat. So we're buying something that we're already throwing away. *Poulet de Bresse* is the most pure bird I've ever worked with in my life.

■ Gainer: When you say the maturity, were those birds chosen...

■ Kaysen: For the competition.

■ Gainer: From the egg almost. And then you were cooking with birds from that selection along the way, during training. So everyone competing was given that opportunity?

■ Kaysen: It's pretty amazing. And when you think about it, we didn't have a foundation set up, so we didn't have any money. Brandon at the time couldn't pay rent at his apartment in San Diego. I was still getting paid through my hotel, as a salary, so I would split my paycheck in half and give half to him so he could pay his rent while we were still in France. I mean, the learning experience, that's part of the competition too. People don't understand, but you're asked to sit down for two years and focus on two projects. In our world, that doesn't happen. These guys [working at Spoon and Stable], whatever projects they have today are going to be different tomorrow.

■ Gainer: There's been a huge evolution in the team, in the way it trains, the structure, and the mentoring. When you competed in 2007, none of this existed. Your experience was totally self-funded. You took the time off...

■ Kaysen: My parents gave me money for it. Totally.

■ Gainer: On the other hand, the European chefs, who to my understanding are not only well known, because the competition is broadcast on network television there, but they are also supported by their country throughout the process. You've really worked hard to establish a system that provides a similar support structure for chefs here.

■ Kaysen: And I think it's only going to get better. I mean we're eight years into having the foundation, the ment'or foundation, and now Philip and I are restructuring, because in Europe, you basically start at 14 years old. You set your sights on doing the Bocuse d'Or because you know what that means for you in 10 or 15 years if you win. We're so quick in how we think in the United States

that it's like [snap], I'm going to do **Top Chef**. I'm going to win **Top Chef**, and then I'm going to get endorsement deals, and then I'm going to get a TV show, and then I'm going to make money. Which is great, but what's your legacy when that's done? What does that mean and how have you effected people who are working under you? My feeling is that Daniel [Boulud], and Thomas [Keller], and Jérôme [Bocuse], and Mario Batali, and Jean-Georges, and Éric Ripert, and all of these amazing chefs are ahead of us. They've laid a foundation for my generation to work in New York City or Singapore. The recipes don't change. All that's changed is the environment that I'm surrounded by. But I can still go into my comfort zone and cook the same *pâté de campagne* that I used to cook in Manhattan and that I'm now making in Singapore. It's the same dish, it's the same ingredients, it's the same texture, it's the same hand movements, which gives me familiarity.

So what is it now that our generation, that my generation, is going to do for the younger generation? That's one of the reasons why I moved back to Minneapolis. Every kid who works in this restaurant, like the one who's waiting to talk to me now—he wants to participate in the young chef competition, which is hosted by ment'or. The foundation gives him a scholarship for \$10,000—if he wins he can travel around the world and do a *stage*, which is great. He would never have that opportunity, with all due respect, if I didn't move back home. All of these guys probably wanted to work in New York or Chicago at some point, but their life didn't allow them to. Something happened so they couldn't move. But that shouldn't change how much they can do. It shouldn't hold them back from what they're able to accomplish. When I moved back home, that became one of my long-term goals: How do we shift the market, not here, but how do we shift the market in the United States to say, look, you can go to New York and San Francisco and Chicago and LA. You should do it, by all means—go for it. But when you come back to where you're from, just be sure that you're coming back ready to train people, to make them better. It's interesting because with Bocuse d'Or, in Europe, these kids train at 14 years old to do the competition, and then at 19 they're the *commis*. Then they go back and train for the "Culinary Olympics" and come back at 24 and compete in the competition. If they don't win they go train again, and they compete again. Here we don't have that structure

set up. We don't have a farm team set up. So Philip and I are trying to figure out how to create that farm team where you're motivating somebody to understand—look, if you win this competition, it's going to change your life. It's not that you're just walking away with a trophy and a medal. You're walking away with contacts, with connections; you're walking away with a new perspective and a new understanding of how to cook food and what that means for your region. Because if you lived in Minneapolis, Minnesota or Kansas City, Missouri, or wherever, and you're able to bring that back to your town, where you're from, people should gravitate. One of the reasons why I think people haven't gravitated here, to Minneapolis, is that they're unaware. John Kraus, from Patisserie 46—they won the bronze in the world pastry competition. That's a huge fucking deal. Huge. You have a world pastry champion who has a pastry shop, and you have the coach for Bocuse d'Or who has a restaurant, and yet nothing's talked about in this town. Is it because they're afraid to talk about it? Do they not understand? Because the reality is that we have an epicenter of training here, right here, in this town. It's not in New York. That needs to be understood, because somebody can come through here and train and move on and actually experience what that means.

■ Gainer: It's pretty clear that from 2007 until now, your involvement in getting people to understand what it is, introducing them to Bocuse d'Or...

■ Kaysen: Do you know how hard that story was for us to sell? I remember my publicist calling me [in 2007] and being like, I can't get you in anything. Nobody. We got one break in **Time** magazine. **Time** magazine gave us a full-page feature, and then **Forbes** jumped on, and everybody jumped on because Time ran a piece on it. But it was like pulling teeth.

■ Gainer: I think this past year was a huge success in two ways. First, winning the silver, the highest the United States has ever placed in the history of Bocuse d'Or. Second, prior to the competition, there was actually a lot of press here in the United States, which means that people were aware of the chefs competing. This level of media attention seems to have picked up with Chef Richard Rosendale in 2013. But it's really also a result of the work that you have been doing with ment'or.

■ Kaysen: Yeah it's interesting. In 2009, there was a book written about us called **Knives of Dawn**. In



2011, they did a documentary on Chef James Kent. In 2013, Richard had tons of press that he basically generated for himself. In 2015, we had a fair amount of press, but you know what, only two bloggers came from the United States to cover Bocuse d'Or this year.

—— Gainer: That's it?

—— Kaysen: That's it. Whereas in 2009, **The New York Times**, **Wall Street Journal**, **Time**, **Forbes**, they were all there.

—— Gainer: The competition is also televised internationally. It's hosted in English and French, and yet it still hasn't caught on here in the United States.

—— Kaysen: I think what you said

earlier was spot on. Introducing the message to people and letting them understand what it means to be associated with it, because what we know in the industry here as a really high award is the James Beard Awards. That's a really high award to win. If you're in the entertainment side of things, **Top Chef** is a big thing to win. It may be losing a bit of its steam, but it's still a payout and a way for a cook who's making 12 bucks an hour to think: This could change my life. This is how I could find investors.

—— Gainer: Many of the competing countries have a history and a social architecture that supports the teams after they have competed or

placed in the competition. What was it like to return after the competition?

—— Kaysen: Prior to this year, we had never won. We've never done better than 6th. So we've never come back after the competition and felt the sense of gratitude or excitement or victory. And when we came back this year, we didn't know what to do with that. I remember talking to Phil, and he said, I feel so depressed. I don't know what to do. I spent a year-and-a-half training for this and all of you guys went back to your busy lives. But what am I going to do? Skylar is moving to Spain, to cook in Spain and to find himself, to get away to find who he is as a person. That competition breaks



people, to the core.

■ Gainer: It's interesting to think about the intensity of the training.

■ Kaysen: They have techno music playing so loud they can't talk to each other.

■ Gainer: Is it 5, 6, 7 days a week? What's the structure?

■ Kaysen: Yeah the structure's kind of built like that. In Phil's case, he stopped consuming all alcohol. I'm not saying he was drinking a lot. But during training, nothing. Cross-training every morning starting at 5 a.m. They go running and then they start working at 7 a.m. and go through the day. But you know, when we went to Lyon, we would work 7 a.m. until 2 a.m. some days. You can't be tired for that.

■ Gainer: So we have two years before the next one. I imagine there will be a competition here to see who will represent the United States. How does that process start?

■ Kaysen: We will call for applications very soon. The process might be similar to the Bocuse d'Or style, though it might shorter this year; it

might be two hours long and not a five-and-a-half hour process. We haven't really determined it all yet. We're finalizing all those details. But yes, we have to find the person in the next couple of months.

■ Gainer: In Europe, to be selected is a real honor.

■ Kaysen: It means you're chef of the year for your country. We want to try to create something similar to that here. We want it to be recognized that if you win the Bocuse d'Or Team USA competition, you're crowned the chef of the year in the United States. We want that to be a very prestigious title.

■ Gainer: How would you determine the regions?

■ Kaysen: What we'll probably end up doing is just calling everybody in and maybe we get lucky and in the future it's four regional competitions, East, West, North, and South, as simple as that, and then you have one major competition in Vegas, the place to do all shows, and whoever wins that is crowned chef of the year. You might be the regional chef of the year in the South, or the regional

chef of the year in the North. Ideally, what we want is to have six or seven chefs competing against each other to find that one chef of the year, and then taking the person who gets second and maybe they can help organize the team and go along with us because perhaps they want to come back in 2019 and do it again. We just need to give incentive; they need to understand how important it is to be a part of it.

■ Gainer: Is there anything else about Bocuse d'Or that you think people should know, that they don't, in terms of general awareness?

■ Kaysen: I think the most important thing that people have to understand is that it's really a way for us as chefs to seek out culinary excellence. It's also a very unselfish way for us to mentor the young and talented chefs in this country, because the truth of the matter is that when Thomas Keller and Daniel Boulud and chefs of that caliber stop working with their restaurants, their legacy is going to be as much about their restaurants as it is about Bocuse d'Or.



Pea Salad

Serves 4

2 cups sugar snap peas, julienned
4 watermelon radishes
(1 for each serving), julienned
12 breakfast radishes
(3 for each serving), sliced
½ red onion, julienned
¼ cup sunflower seeds, toasted
4 pheasant eggs, breaded and fried

(Chicken eggs can be substituted. For gluten free, cook sunny-side up.)

Pheasant Egg preparation

Poach in the shell for 3 minutes (5 minutes for chicken eggs), and then peel the shell off and follow the traditional breading method of flour, egg wash, and bread crumbs. Deep fry at 350° for 1 minute or until golden brown.

Vinaigrette

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
2 tablespoons Greek yogurt
1 teaspoon red wine vinegar
2 tablespoons water
1 cup olive oil (extra virgin)
¼ cup grated Parmesan cheese

Method

Start in blender with red wine vinegar, yogurt, mustard and water. Blend until smooth and then slowly incorporate the olive oil and Parmesan.

Mix ¼ cup vinaigrette with the peas, onion, and radish for the salad. Sprinkle sunflower seeds and nestle a single breaded egg on top.