

CIGARS & LIFE'S BURNING DESIRES

SMOKE



Plus:
BULL RIDING
NOT FOR WIMPS

TABACALERA
PERDOMO'S
NICK PERDOMO

RECONSIDERING
CANADIAN
WHISKY

ROCK
STAR
CHEFS

JUST
SMOKE
AND
MIRRORS?

Sexy

SULTRESS
BROOKE BURNS
BEYOND
BAYWATCH

34
CIGARS
REVIEWED!

www.smokemag.com

\$4.99US \$6.99CAN





Rock Star Chefs

Beyond the hype, are celebrity chefs earning their five stars?
By Jeff Bolton

Like the visionaries who saw the automobile as more than a mechanical horse, or the men who invested in Microsoft, who could have imagined the world of today where the once modest kitchen dwelling professional chef would be the ascendant star in the glittering celebrity firmament? Rock Star Chefs are everywhere: broadcast, cable and satellite television, cook books, restaurants, movies, truck stops, self help books, tchotchke emporiums, magazines, matching towel

sets, cookware lines and cookwear lines can't contain them. Even time itself can't contain them as they are seen simultaneously in time zones around the world, broadcasting their cooking shows, making public appearances to sign autographs, opening fabulous new restaurants while surrounded by "A" list actors (the former Rock Stars...so gauche now), and getting rich writing books with tears in their eyes describing their mother's macaroni and cheese that was missing only \$800 a pound truf-

bles to have been perfect... "God rest her beautiful cooking soul, she never had a truffle because we were too poor, and I'm naming my new line of solid gold cookware after her... won't you please buy it for your mother to show you how much you love her and make her proud..." You're kidding, right?

No, I'm not. But I am struggling to understand if this phenomena is a trend, a fad, or a now a permanent part of our culture. Will the Rock Star Chef live forever, or should they (both genders have ascended to stardom) recede back into the kitchen with their snake oil and sharp knives in hand? And the most burning question of all: are they all really Rock Star chefs or is it the satanic American publicity machine that makes them look like one?

Seeing the global explosion of Rock Star Chefs—or at least the ones I'm not sure really are Rock Stars—makes me uncomfortable because I am a true culinary believer. A food freak. A cuisine maniac. I love it, live it, and breathe it. I have burn scars on my hands from the kitchen. I make sauces that will make you beg because I freakin' love to cook. I make my own stocks. I make extraordinary dishes for my wife and she's so stoked after dinner that she has wild sex with me (once the kids have slaved over the dishes and gone to bed). I travel into the wilds to stab wild hogs to death so I can have, well, wild hog meat in my hickory smoked jalapeno (I smoke 'em myself) super sharp aged Amish cheddar cheese stone ground grits that feature not one thing bought from the store. To quote Billy Bob Thornton in the movie Tombstone, "I ain't kiddin' neither." I wear a chef's coat on Tuesday evening while I'm cooking for my ten-year-old daughter's little girlfriends (they love my duck breast with the demi-glace pomegranate reduction). I can put out a dinner for ten that will compel you to have me come and prepare it at your home for your gourmet club—I did that last week. But what I do in the kitchen is easy. Literally, a piece of cake. I am a great *amateur* chef. Pushing out two-hundred and fifty world class, five-star, virtually flawless dinners on a Friday night to an adoring but demanding clientele is a whole other ballgame that requires extraordinary talent, discipline, experience, eye for detail, and host of other attributes. And that's the rub.

It seems that only a small number of Rock Star Chefs are truly extraordinary, and you can immediately recognize the talent in their hands. But many others who have attained the status of Rock Star Chef, particularly those featured on the turn and burn cooking shows, don't seem to be a lot different than me and that pisses me off. If I'm going to give my viewing time, book budget, Christmas list, and children's inheritance for their cuisine then by gosh I want it to leap off the plate and thrill me all the way into culinary heaven itself. Twice. But I smelled an overcooked, under seasoned rat in the Rock Star Chef firmament. So I did what every self-anointed "great" amateur chef would do if he could: I asked to be the Sous Chef sidekick working side-by-side with an *authentic* Rock Star Chef in the flames of a Friday night in a five-star restaurant to see how the *real* ones operate.



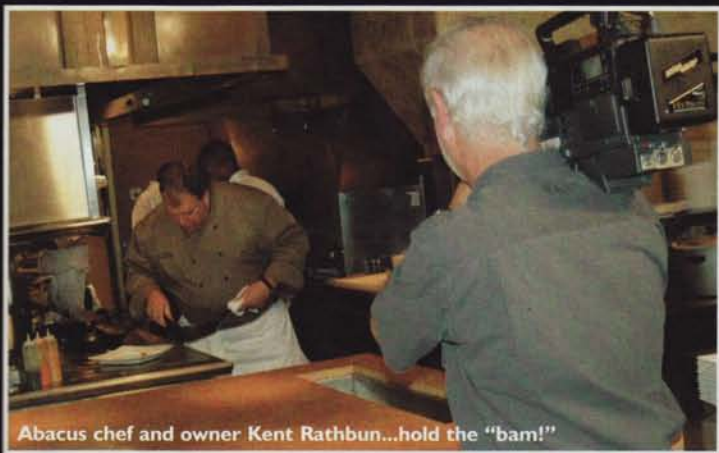
Abacus—Atop The Culinary Pyramid

There is great debate about fine dining restaurant ratings and what truly constitutes a "five star" honor, the traditional mark of world-class dining. People can argue about the value of stars all day long, but I know this: in Dallas, Texas there are thousands of restaurants and precisely five of them have five star ratings. That's it. Five. Cuisine, wine, service, and ambiance that is almost flawless. These are restaurants that are in every meaning of the words, world class. But there is an even higher order among the five star restaurants: the number of years one has held the coveted five-star ranking. Keeping the ranking from year to year is an immense challenge given the fickle nature of the very sophisticated, moneyed fine dining clientele. They dine like rock stars themselves around the country and the world. To keep the five star rating for five years is virtually impossible.

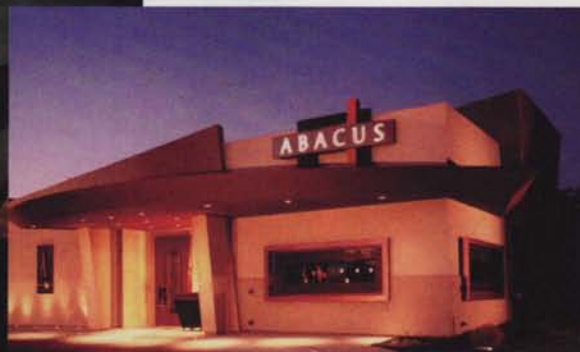
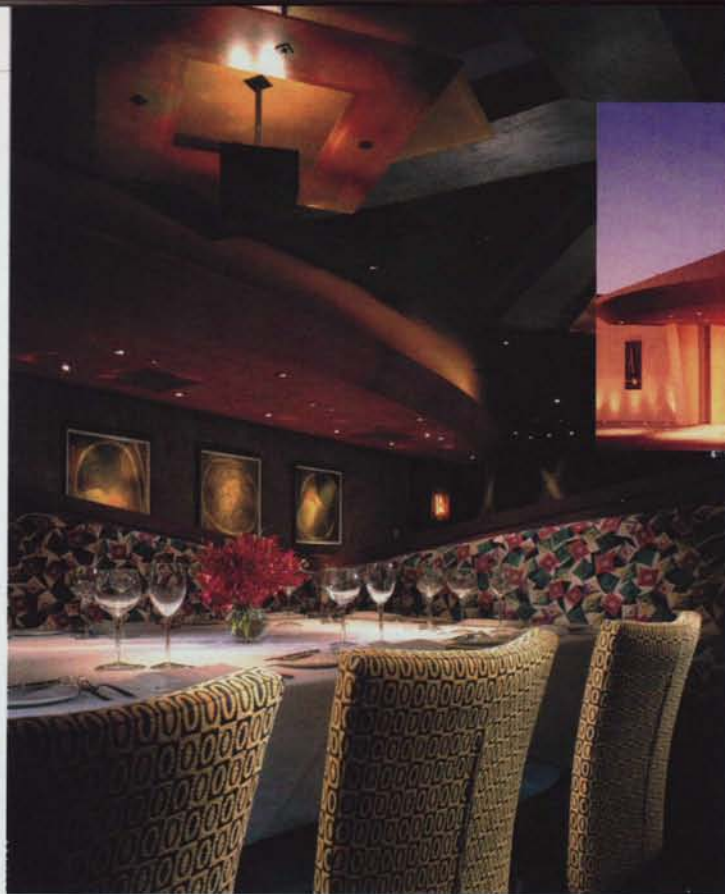
Abacus, and its Rock Star Chef owner Kent Rathbun, are now holding the five star ranking for eight consecutive years, an almost unheard of feat. Rathbun's contemporary global cuisine is influenced by Southwestern, Mediterranean, American, Cajun/Creole, and the Pacific Rim. The menu is a tour de force of exquisite offerings and I've actually heard visitors traveling to Dallas on an airplane excitedly chatting with glee about dining at Abacus. Kent has competed on Iron Chef America and two of his kitchen protégés, Tre Wilcox and Casey Thompson, were contestants in the 2007 third season of Bravo Network's "Top Chef." He is a consultant to Frito-Lay. His "modern outdoors" restaurants, Jasper's, are a smash hit in Dallas, Austin, and Houston. He's in high demand as a fundraising celebrity and he roars around from project to project in a Carrera 4 because he doesn't have a minute to spare. In other words, he's a prototypical Rock Star Chef. I had met him briefly at events around Dallas and liked not only his vibe, but also his willingness to support many charity efforts with his own time and money. So I approached his people (and he needs people as a Rock Star Chef to fend off hordes of media people like me) with the idea and he graciously agreed to the project.

Toto, This Isn't Our Kitchen

The work in a five star restaurant starts very early in the morning with the butchers and prep cooks inspecting, selecting, hand trimming, marinating, and sealing each and every piece of fish, fowl or meat in its own vacuum sealed pouch. They carry them reverently to the aging room, and bring out the aged cuts that will be featured that evening. There is a quiet hum to the activity in the kitchen and it is very calm—not like the screaming madness on some of the cooking shows. The front desk staff,



Abacus chef and owner Kent Rathbun...hold the "bam!"



Kent Rathburn (right) and his contemporary global cuisine restaurant in Dallas, Abacus. At left, the chef's table.

Some of the senior servers pull down six figures. After an entire workday of washing, peeling, polishing, dusting, and prepping, everyone puts on clean uniforms and their game faces.

Kent has roared in with a plain white bag of potato chips that he's just gotten from the Frito Lay test kitchen—a new flavor he's created for them. He rolls efficiently through the restaurant, greeting everyone on the staff by name. He is filmed for *Iron Chef*, takes multiple phone calls, and then turns his attention to me in the middle of the afternoon. "So, what do you want to do?" he asks. "I want to be a Sous Chef in there and cook during the rush." He points to the left. "Do you know about European designed kitchens?" I shake my head no. "You'll get killed back there," he says looking at the open, but cramped kitchen, and is too much of a gentleman to say anymore. "We'll have you do some cooking before the rush and then spend the rest of the time glued next to me."

Before we go into the kitchen I get my first lesson and glimpse into the world of the Rock Star Chef. As Kent walks me around the restaurant I see his incredible attention to detail in the design, operation, and function of the restaurant. His explanation of the VIP customer computer program alone

bartenders, managers, wine stewards, line cooks, sous chefs, and servers all arrive throughout the late morning and afternoon and begin their tasks in preparation for the evening. There is an economy of movement, and again quiet, as a great deal of detail work is being completed very, very quietly. And that's your first clue about a five star restaurant like Abacus—there are no kids here. No learners' permits on the staff. You play your position like a stone cold professional or you'll hear about it. But it won't be from the Rock Star Chef...it will be from your peers.

How Hard Can it Be? Plenty!

The author dons his finest chef's whites and tries his hand in the line of fire at the side of Abacus's Kent Rathburn.



was an eye-popping experience. Every single facet of the operation of the restaurant—from the server uniforms and the consistency of the sauces, to the tiny spotlighting of each dining table and the name and year of a VIP customer's granddaughter's favorite wine—is met by his gaze, evaluated swiftly and corrected if necessary. And that was before the doors even opened.

In the Boiling Cauldron

I'm a moron. I'm so embarrassed. What was I thinking, wanting to cook on the line? I bumble around there before the rush for a few minutes then quietly remove my absolutely useless amateur ass out of the way so the man's work can begin. I join Kent at the expediting station—the bridge from where he will captain the ship this evening. With little warning the din begins to rise and the incoming order ticket printer begins to chatter. Kent calls out the orders to the chefs behind him and he begins to move the order tickets like chess pieces—starters, soups, salads, entrées, tasting plates, special requests in a complex dance that insures they are out promptly, at the right temperature, and in the correct order. He has long ago mastered every position in the kitchen in his many kitchen apprenticeships and his unwavering eyes identify, evaluate, and deal with weakness or problems immediately. By 7:00 pm we are sweating, but standing tall and firm like lighthouses lashed in a hurricane. We're wiping plates, checking orders with chefs in quick staccato sentences, massaging plate presentations, juggling tickets... "Stop that order!" I growl quietly at a server. The sea bass nuggets weren't on the bisque. That's one of Abacus's signature dishes. I'm gonna have some ass over that.

Somehow I never came unglued. But it was an insane ride for five straight hours on the bridge. We never moved. Or peed. Or looked up. A server silently shoved iced tea in front of us every now and then. At one point Kent grabbed a \$50 piece of Kobe beef off the grill from an incorrect order, tore it in two with his hands, handed half to me and we wolfed it down while turning the tickets. At the end we were sober, but we looked like vagrants. As incredible as that experience was, it was only part of why Kent is a true Rock Star Chef and I think the majority of the television chefs may be imposters. Here's why.

There was something else far greater, and even more impressive, going on in the maelstrom of the evening food service. While we were shooting tickets around and pushing out more than two hundred and fifty five-star dinners, Kent was also simultaneously grading, judging, and nuancing the food, the chefs, the servers, and the managers. It was one of the coolest things I have ever seen in my life. It's like what they say about the sadly passed blues legend Stevie Ray Vaughn playing the guitar...that he was so talented and his hands were so big that he could play the lead and rhythm part of a song *at the same time* and it sounded huge and awesome. I heard the ongoing conversation Kent carried on in his head because he was quietly speaking out loud... "Why does that starter take so long...it's backing up orders...why is this ticket out of order...why is the year incorrect on the requested wine...why hasn't that table been seated in the allotted time...and on and on. He was working at a high level of concentration both in and on the restaurant—something mere mortals just can't do.

Hours later, it is all over. The rush has passed and the kitchen throttles back into a moderate hum. Kent looks over at me and says, "You did good tonight, bro, and that was a hell of a catch on the sea bass nuggets." I had wiped plates, passed orders, and sweated like Abacus was my own. I will remember his compliment forever. In the next few minutes I fall invisibly into his wake as he glides effortlessly among the guests with a nod here, a glass of wine there, intimate

Nobu: Trailblazer Rock Star Chef

One of the vanguards who have driven chefs to Rock Star status over the last twenty years is Nobu Matsuhisa. His innovation,



creativity and energy helped bring the high end sushi craze to America from Japan. Since the opening of his first restaurant in Alaska in 1987, he has developed into a fully global brand with more than twenty Nobu restaurants around the world. He counts among his partners men like Robert DeNiro and Nobu shows no sign of slowing down. His restaurants are marked by incredibly fresh

fish presented with Nobu's signature influences. The tasting menu featured at each Nobu is absolute heaven and for sushi experts a visit to Nobu is to partake in the high form of the art. If you meet Nobu at one of his restaurants you will find him warm and hospitable, a true legend who blazed the path for Rock Star Chefs today. www.noburestaurants.com



Nobu-style assorted sushi (above);
broiled black cod with miso (below).



moments with the legions that have come to experience cuisine greatness. He finally settles in for a late night repast with my friends who graciously come to carry my body home. He is gregarious, charming, and every bit a Rock Star Chef. In command, comfortable, and accomplished. As the evening ends my friends are dragging what's left of me out of the restaurant. Kent smiles, nods, and roars away to his home for a few hours sleep. In the early morning hours he creates some inspired starters from scratch, and hustles to a Gulfstream V jet that is waiting with guests at the airport for a weekend with him and his wife in the wine country of Napa, California. Turn and burn indeed. It is life of an authentic Rock Star Chef. **S**