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*Chef Kent Rathbun in the kitchen at Jasper's
photo by Chris Frithie*

In the Kitchen with Chef Kent Rathbun

By Chef Brandon Alarcon



HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED if the contestants on *Iron Chef America* ever stand a chance at beating their professional celebrity chef? How are the contestants selected for the show? If you haven't watched the behind-the-scenes episode of the *Iron Chef* on Food Network, this will give you a little insight.

I was invited to the Dallas home of Kent Rathbun, a professional chef who recently appeared on *Iron Chef* and owner of the upscale restaurant Jasper's in Plano, Austin and Houston and Abacus in Dallas. I was to interview him about his love of cooking, his family, his upbringing and how he got where he is and, most importantly, what it takes to beat an *Iron Chef*.

I arrived early allowing time to snoop around his galley kitchen and see what types of tools and equipment a real chef uses in his home. If you want to cook like a celebrity chef, or just have all the toys like

one, here's a glimpse of what you need. Upon entering the kitchen, it looked like a sea of high-end cooking equipment, all by Viking. He had a specially made stovetop with four burners, a griddle, a wok burner and two convection ovens underneath the stovetop. Chef Rathbun's oven was also a Viking along with his mixer, toaster and food processor. I took a look outside on the patio and found an awesome outdoor kitchen as well. He had two Viking cooking stations on opposite sides of the patio overlooking the pool.

When Chef Rathbun arrived, we set up in the kitchen and spoke of his childhood and how he got started cooking. As he demonstrated how he makes breakfast tacos for his wife and two kids, he told me he and his brother Kevin, who is also a celebrity chef, grew up in Kansas City. His family members were farmers and fishermen that used homegrown produce

in their cooking. Chef Rathbun started cooking in a diner when he was 14 and then took an apprenticeship at an upscale restaurant. He has worked his way into the successful career he has now by hard work and determination. With his diverse background, Chef Rathbun incorporated both diner food and fine dining into his Jasper's restaurants. We also discussed the cooking talents of his five-year-old son, Max, and how he is learning the art of grilling from his father. Maybe we'll see another Rathbun in the restaurant business in ten years?

As he prepared the tacos, he showed me the pans he uses at home and in the restaurant. They were made by All-Clad and are specially designed for chefs. We also took a look at his knives – designed by Porsche and made by Chroma. They are definitely a high-end knife that is solid steel with no handle except a ball bearing on each side for your fingers. These knives are truly a work of art and will impress anyone who sees them in your kitchen. The design is ingenious, including a flat handle that does not allow the knife to roll should your hand get wet or oily.

IRON CHEF

"I was invited to prepare a dinner at a cooking school in Aspen and I didn't know until after it was finished that there was a producer from the *Iron Chef* show in the audience," explained Chef Rathbun. After placing a first call to the producer, Chef Rathbun was invited to be a challenger on the show.

"I'm not giving away anything that people don't already know because they



Chef Kent Rathbun's Viking food processor and Chroma knife

photos provided by Brandon Alarcon

had a behind-the-scenes episode,” Chef Rathbun continues to explain. If you haven’t seen the show, the challenger is given a list of three ingredients and the choice of his professional chef to challenge. Chef Rathbun chose Chef Bobby Flay because of a previous friendship with Chef Flay. Both Chef Rathbun and his brother had worked with Chef Flay in the past and their styles were similar.

For those not familiar with the show, each team of chefs has one hour to prepare at least a four-course meal for a panel of judges. Each team has to use a “secret ingredient” in each of the courses. The “secret ingredient” for the brothers was elk. The contestants are judged on taste, use of ingredient and presentation. The challenger then has to prepare a menu and a grocery list for each course. The chef and the challenger do not know which one of the ingredients will become the “secret ingredient.” Chef Kent and his brother Kevin, also a chef in Atlanta, along with Kent’s assistant, Tre Wilcox, stayed up late the night before the show “like a bunch of college kids cramming for a test.” In the episode earlier this year, you may remember the way the brothers worked together so smoothly that the hosts were saying they were using ESP since they did not even seem to communicate with each other while cooking. It was like watching

a well-oiled machine in action. The way the Rathbun brothers worked together in the kitchen was a symphony of culinary skill, which led to their victory over Chef Bobby Flay.

THE NEXT ADVENTURE

What is next for the great Chef Rathbun? He said more restaurants, an updating of Abacus and the opportunity to teach his skill on a small scale. At his Abacus restaurant, Chef Rathbun currently gives a cooking class one Sunday a month for a small group and teaches them how to cook a gourmet meal. He says, “Some of the same people come back every month to learn something new.”

I mentioned to the chef that it must feel good to know that people who train under him go on to bigger and better things. A perfect example of Chef Rathbun’s training can be seen in his chef de cuisine at Abacus, Tre Wilcox. Tre was recently on the Bravo television show *Top Chef* and advanced to the later rounds and many of the fans thought he should have won. Tre is now working with the Food Network on some television show ideas.

I asked the chef about what we can expect in the future. A burger joint perhaps? Chef Rathbun explained, “The high-end restaurants are sort of fading, especially the ones where there is a dress

code. The baby boomer age group does not want to be in a stuffy restaurant; they want to be in a place they can have fun.” He says he also wouldn’t mind doing a show on the Food Network.

As I closed the interview, Chef Rathbun told me he designed his home kitchen to do entertaining for the restaurant as well as accommodate overflow on busy nights. His home kitchen is also designed to work well for filming and cooking classes. Chef Rathbun said the idea came about one overbooked night at the restaurant and a customer was upset that there was no seating for his party. Chef Rathbun invited him and his party to his house to cook for them. Who wouldn’t rather have a quiet dinner served to you by the celebrity chef himself? He has many events scheduled in his home over the next few months.

Spending time in the home of a wonderful chef with so much experience in the industry inspired me to hone my culinary skills as a chef and to continue to create new things. Try Jasper’s in Plano for a romantic dinner, or bring in the whole family for a backyard dining experience. If you are inspired to learn how to cook or pick up a few tricks, sign up to take some classes from Chef Rathbun.

Brandon Alarcon is a chef and freelance writer.



Cilantro - Jack Cheese Breakfast Tacos

2 oz. butter 8 flour tortillas
16 large eggs 2 Tbsp. kosher salt
1/4 c. cilantro leaves, fresh, chopped
8 oz. jalapeno jack cheese, grated

In a large cast iron skillet on medium heat, melt butter, add eggs, cilantro and kosher salt. Continue to stir eggs until eggs start to scramble. Do not overcook and do not brown. As eggs get to be about 80 percent cooked but still soft, sprinkle in the grated jalapeno jack cheese. Continue to cook until cheese is melted and eggs are cooked. Using another cast iron skillet on medium heat, heat tortillas a few at a time. Stuff with egg mixture. Garnish with grilled tomato salsa.

Grilled Tomato-Jalapeno Salsa

2 oz. canola oil 2 shallots, halved
6 cloves garlic 3 limes, juiced
6 tomatoes (halved, oiled & grilled)
2 jalapeno (halved, oiled & grilled)
1 bunch cilantro, chopped
1 Tbsp. kosher salt

In a medium pot, add oil and saute shallots, garlic, grilled tomatoes and jalapeno peppers until the tomatoes start to break down. Remove from heat and process in a food processor until smooth. Transfer to mixing bowl and add chopped cilantro, lime juice and season with kosher salt. Serve warm or cold. Yields 8 servings

*From Kent Rathbun, Chef of
Jasper's Restaraunt*