



Tom Colicchio

## Portland, Ore., serves as backdrop for Season 18 of 'Top Chef'

In a normal season of "Top Chef," Tom Colicchio is out and about.

When he's not filming the Bravo competition series, he can be found checking out a host city's restaurant scene, attending local shows and sporting events and generally enjoying everything the area has to offer in the one-and-a-half to two-month location shoots.

But thanks to the pandemic, Season 18 in Portland, Ore., was not a normal season. When he wasn't shooting, the New York-based chef had to quarantine in his rented accommodations. And when he did manage to get away on his own, it was to go fishing for steelhead and trout with only his dog by his side.

The new season gets underway Thursday, April 1, in the City of Roses, where 15 executive chefs and restaurateurs will bring their unique skill sets and diverse flavors to bear in challenges including feeding hundreds of frontline workers, celebrating the city's Pan-African cuisine and crabbing on the Oregon coast in tribute to state native and culinary icon James Beard.

Colicchio, who returns as head judge alongside Gail Simmons and host Padma Lakshmi, says the season went well and Portland served as a worthy backdrop for the competition.

"It was great," he says, "because we were in Portland but also got out of Portland. We were on the coast for a while. We were in wine country for a little bit so we got around. So Portland, it's a great place.

Unfortunately for us, for me, I couldn't go out and eat, (and) there's some great restaurants. In fact, I have friends who opened restaurants there and I couldn't go to any of them because I was kind of in lockdown."

Shot in September and October of 2020, the series took advantage of the region's bountiful seafood and produce, particularly fruit, to incorporate into challenges and brought back past chefs including Richard Blais, Carrie Baird, Kristen Kish, Edward Lee and Brooke Williamson to serve on the elite judging and dining panels.

Despite all the restrictions, Colicchio enjoyed the season and is proud of the show's production staff for making everything work under difficult conditions.

"We didn't even know if there was going to be a season," he says, "and we managed and got through it. ... And having so many of the ex-contestants come back was really interesting because they have such a different perspective, having been on before, and so their comments are really good. And that was a lot of fun. It was good to see some of them again because I typically don't see them for the most part after the season's over. So it was really good to be able to see all of the chefs.

"You know, and it's been a tough year for restaurants in general," he continues, "and for the time there, it had sort of taken my mind off the fact that restaurants were all closed and struggling to get by."

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