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BY GEORGE DICKIE

Culinary legends join the judging panel in Season 11 of 'MasterChef'

The aprons are fewer and the challenges are greater as Fox's "MasterChef" returns for Season 11 with a few culinary heavyweights in tow.

Premiering Wednesday, June 2, the new season titled simply "Legends" returns Gordon Ramsay, Aaron Sanchez and Joe Bastianich to the judging panel to evaluate the creations of home cooks vying for the coveted apron, joined by rotating guest judges including Emeril Lagasse, Paula Deen, Curtis Stone, Roy Choi, Nancy Silverton and Morimoto.

For the first time, only 15 aprons will be awarded to chefs that make it through the auditions and also the challenges will be tougher, including a head-to-head battle with Ramsay himself. So the pressure will be ramped up on not only the contestants, but also the judges, who have to think a little harder about who gets an apron this season.

"Usually, we start with 20-25 aprons that we dole out," Sanchez explains. "You compound that with restricting it to 15 aprons ... yes, I'm definitely more judicious."

"And also this is Season 11, so every year the challenges get a little bit more fierce (and) we're a lot more specific as far as their skill sets and their preparedness as far as tackling the (bright) lights and what this industry has to hold. ... So definitely this year was one of those years that we had to be very homed in with their progression throughout

the competition. But also, were we making the right decisions by giving those aprons? Because we wanted them to be prepared for this very intense ride."

And the toll that intensity took on the chefs was clearly visible, says Sanchez. Between the TV cameras, lights, audience, competition and judging, it can be a very intimidating experience. But the judges are also mentors who try to talk the contestants through the competition and the accompanying hubbub. Sanchez commends his longtime friend Lagasse, who appears in the opener, for being particularly adept in this area.

"He brings an unbelievable wealth of knowledge as far as the whole television aspect," he says, "and being able to be part of competitions throughout his career. So I thought he gave a lot of insight as far as calming down the contestants, letting them know that it's about the food, don't worry about the cameras, just do your thing and make sure that your culinary voice comes out. ..."

"I thought, for the most part, all of the contestants rose to the challenge," Sanchez continues, "and they were able to embrace the idea of a mentor, another chef as part of the whole dynamic. I mean, I'm nervous when I'm there because I'm nervous for them. I want them all to succeed. I don't want anybody to fail."

Aarón Sánchez

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