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Tastemakers

BY MAURA RHODES

Chopped Junior
Tuesdays, 9/8c
Chopped
Tuesdays, 10/9c
Food Network

HERE'S A RECIPE

for TV success: Take one accomplished journalist with a passion for food and wine, fold him into a group of multitalented men on the original *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, allow him to marinate there for a few seasons and then make him the main ingredient of one of Food Network's most successful cooking competition shows. We're talking about Ted Allen, of course, the host of *Chopped*, now in its 10th year, and its four-year-old offspring, *Chopped Junior*. Allen is the butter that holds together the many layers of each episode—the rotating panel of judges, the eclectic collection of competing cooks and, of course, those mystery baskets that can be filled with a foursome of just about anything edible—and we mean anything.

You seem to truly savor your role on *Chopped*, even after 10-plus years. What keeps it fun? About seven years in I did think, “Man, am I doing the same thing for too long?” Then I thought, “No!” *Chopped* is a place of passion, discovery, talent. Even though it's tightly formatted, there's no end to the ways it surprises and shocks and even makes you shed a tear. We have a rotating cast of judges and we cycle in guest judges for even more surprises—people from pop culture who're really into food. And then there are the mystery ingredients in the baskets, of course.

When you say “shed a tear,” I'm guessing you're talking about being affected by the moving stories some competitors share and not all those onions being sliced nearby! The kitchen rescues a lot of people. We don't want to dwell on the difficult stories, but it is inspiring to meet people who were, say, having substance problems, and the kitchen rescued them and gave them a place to focus their



TED ALLEN

energy in productive and creative ways. But it's important to know the judges always base their decisions exclusively on what's on the plate—not on a competitor's backstory or personality.

In other words, what we see happening at each station doesn't sugarcoat the challenge. Correct! The longer I do this, the more I learn how complex it is to cook competitively. You can be a highly accomplished chef and fall flat on your face on *Chopped*.

To be a great cook you have to be a control freak. On *Chopped*, we take away all control and make you jump through all these hoops. It's interesting to watch a chef surrender the control that's necessary for them to do their job in real life.

Do the kids on *Chopped Junior* approach the challenges differently than the adults? I think they'd be more fearless. I think that's true. They aren't as embarrassed in front of the cameras or as locked in to established ways of doing things. But kids know a lot about food. That's super fun. And then you have the addition of the cute factor. One funny thing is they'll call basically every sauce a reduction, which is wrong, of course: A hollandaise is not a reduction!

Do you bring home tips to your own kitchen? Tons! And I've got the cell phone numbers of all these experts, so if I've got a cooking question, I can go straight to the source. It's a great perk.