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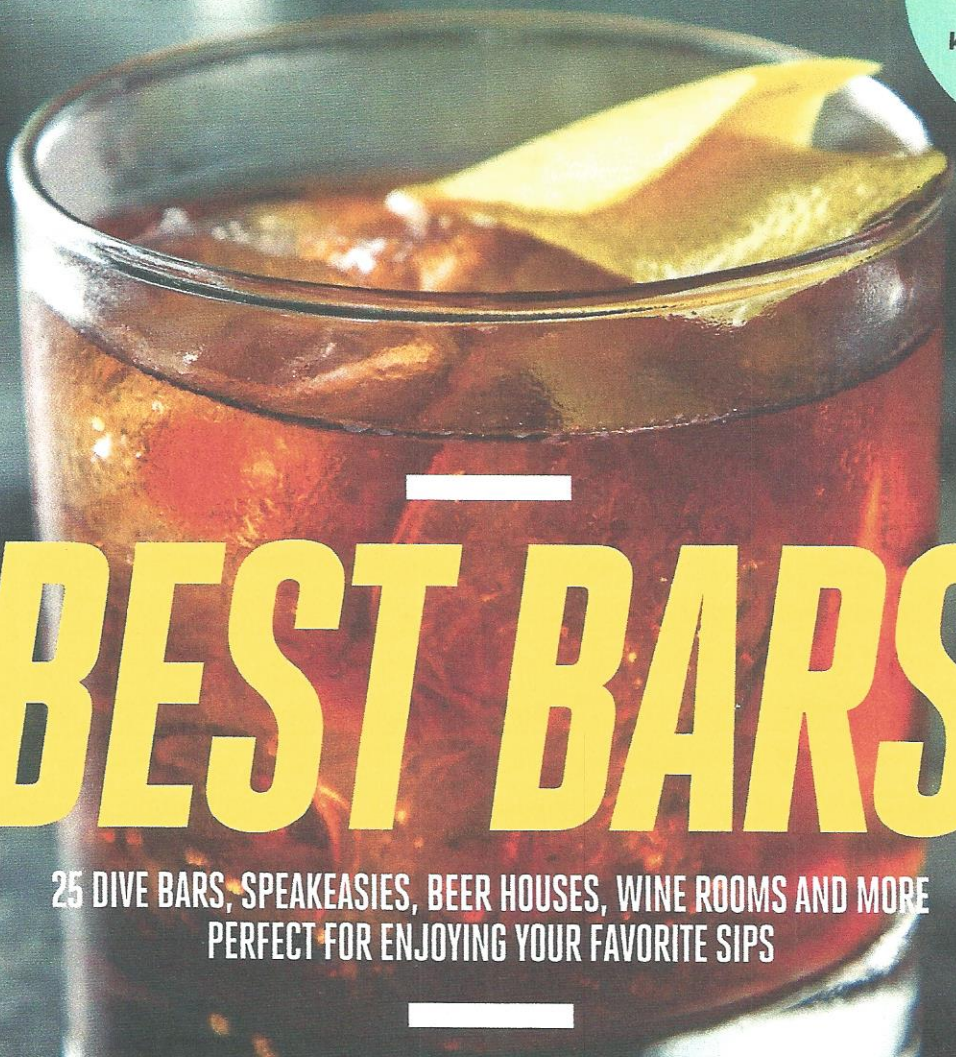
How a few local organizations are tackling the immigration crisis **PAGE 72**

CELEBRITY CHEF

Luca Della Casa dishes about the reality of *Food Network Star* **PAGE 95**

San Antonio

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Ciao Belli

Luca Della Casa's time on *Food Network Star* may not have landed him his own show, but he's still spending time in front of the camera. For the past few months, the *Silo and Nosh* chef has been posting weekly YouTube videos explaining Italian phrases. Most of the idioms wouldn't be very useful on an Italian vacation, but the videos show off the foreign charm and humor that won him fans in his reality TV spin. (Find out what he really thought of the experience on page 96.)



Reality Bites

The sweet and sour truth of Chef Luca Della Casa's star turn on the Food Network

BY BECCA HENSLEY

Though he was talking about the theater, 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau already had reality television figured out when he penned: "Let the spectators become an entertainment unto themselves." If he could learn to work a remote control today, Rousseau might be surprised to discover what really happens when viewers take to the stage, particularly when they come armed with aprons, bowls and knives. Culinary programs that feature chefs in gladiator-like competition are all

the rage—and a few San Antonio chefs have performed valiantly.

The latest local chef to take a turn on reality TV may have been closest of them all to the taste of victory, despite a rocky start. Luca Della Casa, executive chef of sister restaurants Nosh and Silo on Austin Highway, went to an open casting call for *Food Network Star* last November to feed his curiosity. "I remember 20 years ago being a chef was not so glamorous," the native of Torino, Italy, says. Glamorous or not, his dimples, biceps, ruggedly handsome face and

Italian-fueled passion for food—not to mention that accent—made the 10-year resident of San Antonio a shoo-in for this summer season of the Food Network's search for the next celebrity chef.

It seemed like Della Casa's time in the spotlight came to an end quickly when he was eliminated in the second episode for not connecting with the camera, but the competition continued with an online component called *Star Salvation*, hosted by Damaris Phillips, season 9 winner of *Food Network Star*, as

Della Casa was at first thrown by the cameras but his passion for cooking and natural charisma brought him back to the competition.

favorite. His success sent him back to *Food Network Star* in the seventh episode and he made it to the final competition. In the runoff for the grand prize—a show on Food Network—Della Casa narrowly missed out, coming in second place, to the ire of fans from San Antonio and beyond. Needless to say, it was an experience he won't soon forget, but he looks back with positive memories.

When Della Casa first discovered he had been chosen as a contestant last autumn, he admits he knew little about *Food Network Star*. He turned to the Internet to peruse all the past seasons. "I wanted to learn as much as possible," he says. Though he was a fast study, he acknowledges now he was very naïve. "I went in thinking I knew how television and the show would be," he says. Not so much. Della Casa says the reality part of reality TV took a backseat to drama, which meant that some scenes had to be filmed over and over again and spontaneous-seeming moments were staged. The days were long and intense: Early starts were the norm, given the demands of wardrobe, lighting, makeup and camera positioning. Then there was the tedium of filming. "We would wait—then wait a little more," he says. At the end of each day, he would fall into bed, exhausted.

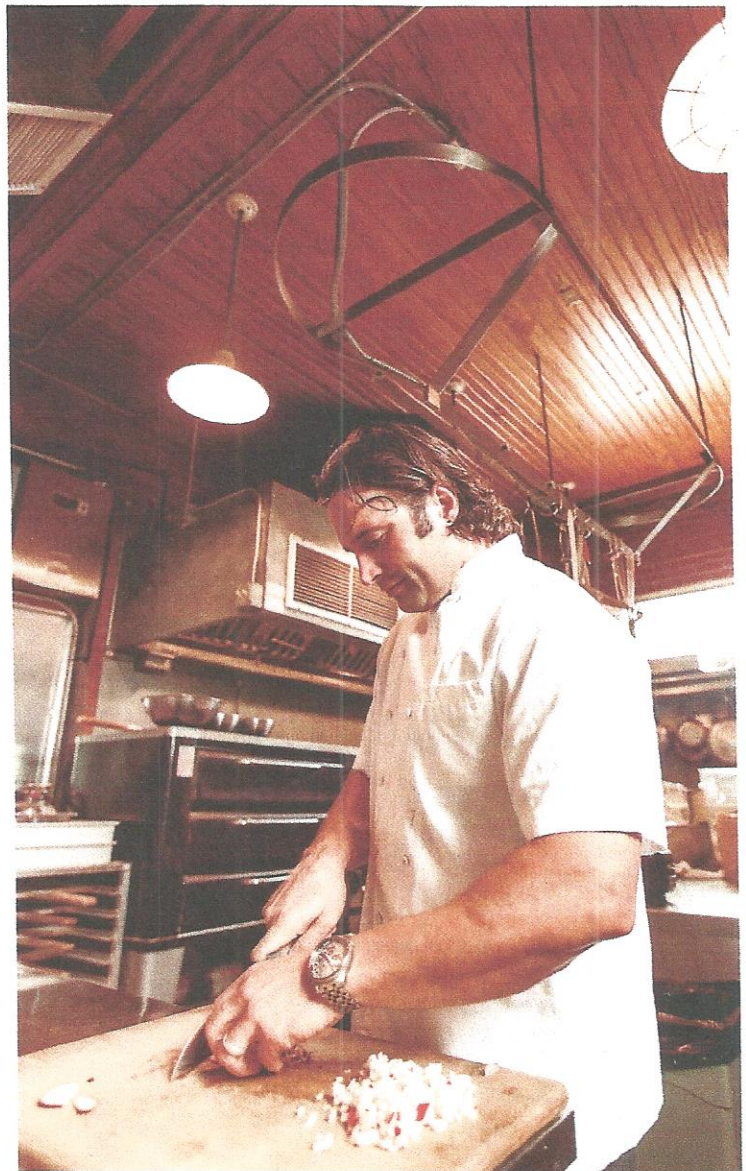
The first episode remains etched in his memory. It was his first reality of reality TV—and it was overwhelming. "It was my turn to come out of the big door to meet the other finalists. But in addition to them, I found more than a hundred people waiting behind the cameras," he remembers. There were medics, audio technicians, camera operators, producers, makeup artists, wardrobe specialists—and "assistants to

Geoffrey Zakarian, 2011 winner of *The Next Iron Chef*. With a second shot and more time in front of the camera, Della Casa grew more comfortable and wowed the spectators, rising up to become an audience

the assistants," he jokes. "At the beginning, we contestants were kind of lost in front of all this."

That lost sensation didn't fade quick enough to save him from early elimination, but once he transitioned to *Star Salvation*, Della Casa began to grow accustomed to all the pandemonium. "Suddenly, it does not affect you anymore," he says. "You focus on being yourself." His confidence increased in front of the cameras. He learned to bring his charismatic Italian-spiked energy into play. The lens loved him and so did the online viewers. "I realized I could not and should not doubt what I was going to say on camera," he says. He won challenge after challenge and earned his way back in to the main competition, but to him, that wasn't the best part. "I grew as a person," he says. And, the long days in exciting locales (New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas) created bonds and solidified friendships. The cast and crew became very close and mutually supportive. "For that alone, the experience was worth it," he says.

And yet, as he became more successful, what started as an endeavor to satisfy his curiosity, developed into an obsession. He realized that not only did he want to win, but that he had



something special to share with the world if he did. He wanted to impart the secrets learned in his grandmother's kitchen. "That's where I discovered cooking. She is my culinary inspiration," he says. Though he's been in the restaurant business for more than 20 years, and cooked around the globe, he says his passion for cooking comes back to his grandmother's philosophy that good food makes people happy. "I always find joy in eating good food," he says. "Even now, when I feel a little down, I will cook myself something delicious—like eggplant parmigiana—and all my problems seem to go away."

In the end, Della Casa lost to Lenny McNab, known as the gourmet cowboy. But his television star days may not be over. Though he plans to focus on Silo and Nosh as before, he says he believes that his time on the stage isn't finished. "And, this time," he says, "I won't need a second chance." ★

STAR CHEFS

Three other SA chefs who've earned reality TV fans

NEDRA HARRIS

TV debut: *Hell's Kitchen* Season 11 (2013)

Star status: Eliminated in episode 12, ranking eighth out of 20

Then: Kitchen manager at Chart House at Tower of the Americas

Now: Executive chef at Werner's The Culinary Experts Prime Steaks & Seafood

CHRIS COOK

TV debut: *Chef Wanted with Anne Burrell* Season 2 (2013)

Star status: Eliminated in the one-episode competition against three other Texas chefs

Then: Executive chef at Oro Restaurant at the Emily Morgan Hotel
Now: Executive chef and food and beverage director at Sandy Oaks Olive Orchard

BENJAMIN KNACK

TV debut: *Hell's Kitchen* Season 7 (2010)

Star status: Eliminated in episode 14, coming in third place of 16 competitors

Then: Instructor at New England Culinary Institute in Vermont/
Chef de Cuisine at Sel de la Terre
Now: Executive chef at Las Canarias and Ostra