

Celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay set to heat things up in Whistler

By Mia Stainsby, Vancouver Sun
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WHISTLER — International superchef Gordon Ramsay, as famous for his demonic meltdowns and apoplectic cursing as for his sublime cooking, will be in Whistler in the next season of his unscripted TV reality show, Hell's Kitchen.

In the show, **16 chefs vie for a coveted position in a restaurant vetted by Ramsay. In the coming season, the sixth, the restaurant kitchen awaiting the winning chef is at Araxi, and the winner will work with chef James Walt.** It will be the show's first foray outside the U.S.

Ramsay and the crew shot some scenes at the Whistler restaurant last January. The two-hour premiere is set to air July 21 on Fox.

"It's an amazing prize — the best we've had," Ramsay said in a press statement. And that is towering praise, considering two of Ramsay's restaurants were prizes, in the first and fourth seasons.

"The winning contestant will have the added privilege of joining executive chef James Walt in welcoming the world during the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games," Jennifer Sprague of Fox said.

"Fox's executives surveyed key contacts and asked about the best restaurants and things pointed to Araxi. They were very interested in Whistler," Shelley McArthur, publicist for the restaurant, said.

In a recent CBC-TV interview on The Hour, host George Stroumboulopoulos asked Ramsay to name the best Canadian restaurant and Ramsay shot back: "Araxi, in Whistler." In retrospect, that was the only acceptable answer, and great news for Araxi.

But Araxi owner Jack Evrensel is keeping calm. He doesn't watch TV and when asked if he'll watch the next season of Hell's Kitchen, he laughs nervously, meaning uh, no. "Our focus is on product, people, service. It's not about publicity and those are reasons they came to us in the first place," he said.

When Ramsay was in Whistler, Evrensel and Walt sat down for a two-hour dinner with him. "He's a fantastic man," says Evrensel. "He's a chef's chef who's very, very involved and cares about ingredients and product. He had tons of questions for the chef. He was very impressed with James." Evrensel witnessed only the reasonable side of Ramsay. "He was very gracious, very thoughtful and charming."

Say what? Charming? "Yes. Absolutely."

Araxi chef James Walt seconds that. "He was great. He was gracious. I was really impressed. He wasn't who I thought he would be," he says. "I was impressed with his knowledge. Despite how he's portrayed, he's a three-Michelin star chef and he's earned his stripes. The bottom line is, he thinks this is a great restaurant and felt there was something special here. I feel pretty proud about that."

Walt said Ramsay had the five-course tasting menu at the restaurant and even in winter, key ingredients were local. Highlights included Qualicum Beach scallop soup with local crab, spot prawns and lightly poached oysters. "We foam the soup and serve it tableside."

Ramsay, who's had plenty of good Scottish beef, said he was "gob-smacked" with the braised Pemberton beef cheeks and ribs, served with aged tenderloin. He ended with Okanagan pears with Lillooet honey and pear sorbet.

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