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## NICKEL CITY SHOW DOWN



### FOUR LOCAL CHEFS TAKE ON ALL COMERS IN BUFFALO'S FIRST TASTE OF COMBAT COOKING AS LIVE ENTERTAINMENT

By Andrew Z. Galarnau / NEWS FOOD WRITER

J. J. Richert was a 15-year-old dishwasher when he fell in love with the controlled mayhem and pyrotechnic rush of restaurant cooking.

"The flame, the noise, the chatter of pots and pans and plates hitting the window — I was really drawn to that," said Richert, now a chef in his own right, at Kenmore's Torches.

Richert and three other established local chefs will aim to conjure up that sizzle during head-to-head battles with worthy challengers in a contest being called Nickel City Chef, Buffalo's first taste of combat cooking as live entertainment.

The Sunday series begins June 21, with Nickel City Chef Krista Van Wagner of Curly's Bar and Grill in Lackawanna firing up her stove and facing challenger Brian Mietus, executive chef at Bacchus.

Four monthly bouts are set, with Van Wagner, Paul Jenkins of Tempo, Adam Goetz of Sample and Richert as the home team. They'll face opponents drawn from more than 20 qualified applicants who wanted a shot, said organizer Christa Glennie Seychew.

Nickel City Chef has bigger goals than Sunday afternoon entertainment, said Glennie Seychew, who's been working on the idea for two years. "We want to promote locally owned restaurants, showcase ingredients grown and produced here in Western New York, and to aid in putting Buffalo on the map culinarily for something besides chicken wings."

Tempo's Jenkins said he liked the idea of the series as a way to show off some of the best culinary talent in the region. "The more we do together, collaborating, the more it raises awareness of Buffalo as a regional destination for food and wine," Jenkins said.

The pressure of going from raw ingredients to finished dishes while strangers watch every move — or being judged in public — doesn't faze Jenkins.

"That's the measure every day in this business," he said. "What kind of job do you have where, 'I liked you, I didn't like you' is the measure every single day?" Jenkins asked. "You're only as good as your last [expletive] steak."

Echoing the "Iron Chef" shows that inspired it, Nickel City Chef bouts will involve two chefs who are presented with an ingredient, and given 60 minutes to transform it into three dishes that are rated by judges.

Unlike the Food Network version, Nickel City Chef will welcome guests. For \$20, people get a drink and appetizers, sushi, dumplings and little Vietnamese sandwiches by SeaBar's Mike Andrzejewski at the June date. There's a cash bar, but no hard liquor.

Nobody's getting paid, but part of the proceeds will go to the Food Bank of Western New York. "We're trying to keep the price low enough that dishwashers can come," Glennie Seychew said. "I'm not going to alienate my No. 1 crowd, the people who work in kitchens."

The event is itself designed as an appetizer of sorts, said Glennie Seychew. It ends around 5:30 p. m., so those who find their appetite whetted might seek consolation in a nearby emporium of fine dining.

The event will be staged at Artisan Kitchens, a fine kitchen supplier on Amherst Street. Each chef will have plenty of room to work with an assistant in a fully outfitted \$100,000 kitchen, Glennie Seychew said.

The live event is designed for television, though it's Web-only for now, Glennie Seychew said, with 15-minute episodes packaged for Internet broadcast. The hunt for an appropriate television partner is under way.

Getting out the word about Buffalo's fine dining is motivating, but there's also the thrill of being challenged to excel, said Van Wagner.

"I have to be at my best," she said. "I like being pushed, and that's what it does — give me a chance to share my passion."

Spectators will get a chance to see experienced chefs try dishes and techniques too risky for restaurants. Goetz said he's thinking of trying to pull off something unique in public for the first time.

"When you're doing something like this," he said, "you can put a dish out there, or do a technique that is kind of a pain in the [rear], that you maybe wouldn't do in a restaurant."

That said, Goetz hopes there might be something spectators can take home with them.

"I think people are really going to understand what's going on while we're cooking," he said, "and maybe try it themselves." Hopefully recipes can be added to the Nickel City Chef Web site after competitions, but that's not guaranteed, Glennie Seychew said.

The bottom line is that eight local chefs will get the chance to step into the shoes of the television Iron Chefs whose work they've devoured for years.

If it takes off, maybe young cooks will sit on their couches scoffing at Richert's choices, just like he did watching the show: "What's he doing? He's never going to beat Morimoto with that move. Good idea: red curry ice cream. The judges'll *love* that."