



Richie Rich

Haunted by his surprising defeat in *Top Chef*'s fourth season, Atlanta's Richard Blais finally brings home the title (and \$200,000) in a grueling *Top Chef: All-Stars* battle.

| By Katie Kelly Bell | Photography by Alex Martinez |

By now, almost everyone in Atlanta should know Richard Blais. He's the creative genius behind the delicious fun at FLIP Burger Boutique, he's the dude with the wacky hair and as of March 30, he's Atlanta's only *Top Chef* winner. With almost bionic precision, he executed win after win during his second shot at the title. Indeed, beneath the warm, self-effacing wit and gelled hair, beats the heart of an ultra-competitor. It propelled him to the title that so painfully eluded him before: *Top Chef*. Our "before and after" interview reveals a man with a perfectionistic edge, a penchant for worry and heaps of ambition.

"Let me be the underdog, it's better that way. I think my failures have served me well."

—*Top Chef: All-Stars* Finale, March 30, 2011

March 21, 2011—Two episodes to go...

You are so busy—producing a baby food line, making appearances on the Science Channel, consulting and running FLIP—do you even have time to watch the show? We watch it. I get nervous watching it, even now, when I know how each episode will end.

Why did you decide to go through this again? To fix that first loss, absolutely. You can rationalize other reasons to come back, outside of victory—but we all came back to win.

What will it mean if you win? Winning will be a pivotal point in my career. Losing will be the biggest failure of my career. Winning is why I came back. I'm a big sports guy, and if your team gets to the Super Bowl and you lose, there is only one thing to do next year—get back to the Super Bowl and win.

"I might just be that person that can't win... always the bridesmaid, never the bride."

—*Top Chef: All-Stars* Finale, March 30, 2011

Are you this competitive in everything you do? Yes and I don't compromise to win. On the show I wear an Andy Roddick bracelet that says, "No compromise." I'm not mean-spirited about it, and some might think I'm too intense, but it's who I am.

Are you always so intensely critical of your work? Conceptually, I am. I always wish I had more time. Every time I'm done, I always want to CONTINUED...

...CONTINUED tinker with the dish more. I don't feel that way about flavor—it'll always be tasty.

What's it like in the "dorm"? It's like college. The first run there was tons of drinking and camaraderie. Everyone is so excited to be on TV. But this season was serious. Everyone focused on cooking. But at the end of the day, you still wake up and Mike Isabella is on the couch, topless, Carla's making scrambled eggs...

"It's been the hardest, toughest, craziest Top Chef season ever. The only way to redemption is for me to win this." —*Top Chef: All-Stars* Finale, March 30, 2011

Any thoughts on Mike "stealing" your chicken oyster idea on an oyster shell? Water under the bridge. And the word "stealing" is a bit rough; he saw a picture, borrowed a concept. The fact he didn't acknowledge it right away wasn't cool, but he does acknowledge it later, and if you do, then it's fine.

March 30, 2011—The Finale...

"I choked once before and it's haunted me; it's been in my head for years. I'd like to exorcise some demons tonight." —*Top Chef: All-Stars* Finale, March 30, 2011

March 31, 2011—Day after the win...

What was your first thought when Padma said, "Richard... you are Top Chef?" My first thought was, "What? Wow." I'd prepared myself to hear Mike's name called, so it was amazing!

What was your second thought? It was more of a feeling, an overwhelming and huge emotional release. I felt like I'd finished. Like the race was over.

The biggest moment of your career, to date, is now behind you—what's next? What do you plan to do with the \$200,000? I think, when you win *TC*, you have a duty to spend the money for what it was intended, the restaurant of your dreams.

What's next? I have a hot dog concept under way in Virginia-Highland, but don't expect a hot dog version of FLIP. Think homemade buns, hand-crafted dogs, house mustard—just exciting, creative food.

How do you want Atlantans to see you? That's for you guys to decide. I'm here, I have a home here, I have restos here, I think I'm an Atlantan. And as a stubborn New Yorker, it took me a few years.

"I willed this, I tried so hard." —Through tears, after winning *Top Chef: All-Stars*, March 30, 2011 📺

