

This page: It was trial by fire for Linton Hopkins in Kitchen Stadium. Opposite page: The pressure cooker lets flavors shine through in his acclaimed dishes including (left to right) pork belly, fuji apple tart and mushrooms.

# IRON, STEEL & FIRE

Atlanta chef Linton Hopkins brings Southern flair to Iron Chef's Kitchen Stadium

BY KATIE KELLY BELL

**“IT’S LIKE BEING BACK IN CULINARY SCHOOL WHERE YOU HAVE YOUR INSTRUCTOR LOOKING OVER YOUR SHOULDER. IT’S TERRIBLE! THE WHOLE EXPERIENCE WAS LIKE BEING CHARLIE IN THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY.”**



**Nerves of steel** are just as important as knives of steel when it comes to competing on the Food Network’s wildly popular duel of chefs, “Iron Chef America.” Atlanta native and chef/owner of elegant Restaurant Eugene, Linton Hopkins is one of the few area chefs to have the honor of competing, putting Atlanta and Restaurant Eugene in the celebrity spotlight.

Oddly enough, long before he arrived on the set of “Iron Chef,” Hopkins was preparing for a career in medicine. “I never knew this was going to be my career until I was accepted to culinary school,” he says. “I’d taken my MCATs, filled out my applications, but I just didn’t want to send them off. I wanted a job that really absorbed me emotionally, intellectually and physically.”

Being in the kitchen was natural for Hopkins. “I’d always cooked at home; making *beurre blanc* and *hollandaise* as a boy, reading cookbooks at an early age, but I just never considered it for a career,” he says. Atlantans are thankful that he did, as Restaurant Eugene has earned a reputation for elevating Southern cuisine to impressive new heights.

Before making his debut at Kitchen Stadium in New York City, Hopkins competed locally against four other chefs for the coveted slot on “Iron Chef” including culinary wizards Kevin Rathbun (Rathbun’s), Anne Quatrano (Bacchanalia) and Gerry Klas-kala (Aria). “I was just happy to be in such esteemed company,” he says. “It was great to just be included in that group of chefs.” Rather than have an actual one-hour cook-off, the four chefs were each sent a secret ingredient and asked to prepare five dishes for local critics and Food Network judges.

“They sent all of us a box of corn on Friday, so we had three days to get everything

ready for Monday’s tasting,” Hopkins says. “We served up Georgia caviar over corn blini, among other dishes, but I think we won on our corn lollipop.” Comprised of balls of sweet corn ice cream (on lollipop sticks) rolled in pistachio brittle, the dessert was a tasty hit amongst the judges.

Winning the cook-off in Atlanta was scant preparation for battling veteran Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto. “I picked Morimoto for several reasons: He’s tied to the original show (which I loved so much), and I’ve eaten at his restaurant in Philadelphia where he prepared a whole tasting menu for me several years ago. I also know he is one of the fiercest competitors up there and I wanted to face the best.”

During six practice sessions at home in Atlanta, Hopkins focused on structures that would go with all of the different items that might use the secret ingredient. “They told us it [the secret ingredient] would be one of three things. Food Network executives also sent a pantry list of everything that they have and you send a list to them of pantry items you want. You can’t bring anything in except your two assistants, your knives and two stocks, so being prepared is essential.”

But all the preparation in the world still can’t stifle first-timer jitters. Chefs don’t normally need to contend with cameras and microphones. “The camera is on top of your

hands while you’re cutting, the lighting is bright and intense, wires are everywhere, roving camera crews and boom microphones surround the kitchen,” Hopkins says. “It’s like being back in culinary school where you have your instructor looking over your shoulder. It’s terrible! The whole experience was like being Charlie in the Chocolate Factory.”

Getting everything plated and finished in an hour is the easy part, according to Hopkins. “The judging is a whole other aspect of the show that is more nerve-wracking than the one hour of actually cooking. Everything must be cooked after one hour, then you have 45 minutes to have everything plated for the judges. That part is stressful. You have to hold things slow; make sure your dishes don’t cool or get overcooked.”

For now Hopkins is just enjoying the suspense leading up to the big show (due to air this spring). “I signed a million dollar clause not to reveal the winner. I’m terrible at keeping secrets but I’ve enjoyed keeping this one.”

When asked to reflect on his success so far, Hopkins sits back and replies with a grin: “Freedom, I have such freedom. Where I am now offers a great freedom of what you want to do with food. Gustatory experience is tied into history, family, emotions and memories.”

For Hopkins and his dinner guests, the “Iron Chef” experience will be a memory for the ages.