

Chicago chefs sizzle on Bravo's 'Top Chef Masters'
Maureen Ryan | TV critic
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The name "Top Chef Masters" (9 p.m. Wednesday, Bravo) might be a little unwieldy, but it's accurate. It also highlights Chicago culinary superstars, such as Graham Elliot Bowles, Rick Bayless and Art Smith.

"Top Chef," the mother ship that spun off "Masters," which premiered June 10, isn't really about top chefs -- it's about kitchen obsessives who aspire to be among the culinary elite. The contestants may find success after the show -- several alumni of the Bravo reality program are doing well in the restaurant world -- but they're just would-be top chefs during the competition.

"Masters," on the other hand, is a competition for chefs who already have achieved mastery and success. Each week, four well-known chefs are pitted against each other in interesting challenges.

In Week 1, for example, chefs such as Hubert Keller had to whip up their fare in a dorm room.

Chicago is well-represented in the coming rounds of "Masters": Bayless of Frontera Grill and Topolobampo competes in a street-cooking challenge June 24, and Smith of Chicago's Table Fifty-Two is one of the chefs in the July 22 episode.

And Wednesday's quickfire challenge is an oldie but a goodie from "Top Chef's" second season. It's quite interesting to see which of these noted food-world hotshots gets this whimsical challenge impressively wrong.

Wednesday's main challenge has the chefs, who include molecular gastronomist Wylie Dufresne of New York's wd-50 and Bowles (a veteran of Charlie Trotter's and Tru who is now the proprietor of the restaurant Graham Elliot), coming up with cuisine that would be appropriate for the islanders on "Lost." Among those dining on and rating the chefs' fare Wednesday: Damon Lindelof and Carlton Cuse, the executive producers of "Lost," along with the rest of the writers of the ABC show.

It's a shame that the fast-paced "Masters" doesn't spend much time on the "Lost" panelists' reactions to the chefs' imaginative and delectable-looking meals. Another quibble: These are terrific chefs (the two other competitors are Suzanne Tracht and Elizabeth Falkner). Anyone whose ever braised or pureed anything would probably like a more lingering look at how these masters work under pressure and with limited resources.

Still, "Masters" is entertaining, partly because it's fun to see successful chefs battle their nerves; there are times when Dufresne looks as panicked as any untested "Top Chef" competitor. Bravo bleeps out Dufresne's frequent profanity, but it won't be hard to figure out his expletive of choice, which he utters when not running around the kitchen like a

trainee who has had 10 cappuccinos.

And if the three top judges on this show (who aren't the usual "Top Chef" judges, by the way) are a little dry and flavorless, it really doesn't matter.

What makes this show work is that these chefs are all extremely competitive. The money they win goes to charity (and each week's winner proceeds to a final competition round), but it's not about the prizes.

These chefs didn't make it in the restaurant world by being laid-back; they are scrappy, imaginative and they hate losing. It's hard to imagine that they care what the TV audience will think of them, but it's clear that they don't want to look bad in front of their food-world colleagues.

By the end of Wednesday's episode, you'll wish you were on the "Lost" island -- as long as these chefs are on the Dharma Initiative's kitchen staff.

"Top Chef Masters" comes from the crack Magical Elves production company, which also whips up "Top Chef" and used to make "Project Runway" for Bravo. ("Runway" will debut in its new home, Lifetime, in August.) "Masters" has the Elves' signature snappy editing, smart casting and zippy pace.

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