

More than 20 Kentucky chefs have competed on national TV. The cool thing? Most are women.



ALTON STRUPP/CJ

Food Network Star season 10 contestant Loreal Gavin inside her home kitchen in Louisville. The chef recently published her own cookbook.

Female chefs rising TV stars

Kentucky cooks, especially women, are helping to expand pools of reality food show contestants

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Next time you tune into a cooking competition from Food Network, Bravo or another station, pay attention to where the show's contestants live.

You'll likely hear the same cities again and again: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles.

America has fully bought into the reality food show craze. And while viewers across the nation are eating it up, many contestants selected to keep the shows churning still hail from the country's traditional food meccas.

But a change is taking place. The pools of contestants are starting to expand. And in the past five years, more than a dozen Kentucky cooks have been featured on everything from "Cutthroat Kitchen" to "Top Chef."

The extra cool thing? Most have been women.

The Courier-Journal compiled a list of more than 20 Kentucky and Southern Indiana residents who've been featured on national cooking competitions since 2006 and found that nearly two-thirds of the group were female chefs.

That's rare for an industry in



TOMMY GARCIA/BRAVO

"Women are strong, it's not that big of a deal. ... it should be what they're doing, what they're bringing to the plate rather than if they're a woman or a man."

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LISTEN

Hear Loreal Gavin, a.k.a. "The Butcher Babe," discuss her book and upcoming projects on the Mighty Fine Food & Farm podcast, presented in partnership with Kertis Creative. Find the podcast at courier-journal.com or soundcloud.com/cj-mighty-fine-farm-food.

which women make up just 21.4 percent of chefs and head cooks nationwide, according to 2016 Bureau of Labor Statistics Data.

"There are gobs and gobs of all these new aspiring female chefs taking over television," said Brandi Mudd, a finalist in the most recent season of "MasterChef." "I think it makes women realize being a chef isn't only a male's occupation. It's inspiring women now to see it as an option."

Women who commented for this story gave various reasons for applying to their respective shows.

Annie Pettry of Decca wanted to face her stage fright. Kristina J. Addington of V-Grits wanted help starting her own business. Loreal Gavin wanted a new direction. Mudd just wanted to see if she could do it.

"I wasn't interested in being on TV or anything like that," Mudd said. "I just wanted people to try my food."

Mudd is a full-time teacher who grew up in Irvington, a town of about 1,100 with just a handful of mom-and-pop restaurants.

She applied to "MasterChef" on a whim and ended up becoming a fan

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PAUL CHENEY/BRAVO

Annie Pettry, who competed last year on Bravo's "Top Chef," now co-owns Decca, a critically acclaimed restaurant on East Market Street.

Chefs

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favorite in the 2016 season — receiving numerous messages from other small-town dreamers who said her success encouraged them to follow passions of their own.

"On career day, I had kids dressing up as teachers/chefs," Mudd said of students at her school. "There are so many other options besides just what's right here in town."

Mudd said her experience on "MasterChef" built her self-confidence and made her begin to see a future in food.

Pettry, an established chef, said that despite working in restaurants since she was 15, she didn't recognize cooking could be a career until sometime in her late 20s.

She now co-owns Decca, a critically-acclaimed restaurant on East Market Street.

Late last year, she competed on Bravo's "Top Chef" in hopes that putting herself in the spotlight would help cure her stage fright.

Unfortunately, she was ousted in the second episode. But the show did give Decca good exposure, Pettry said, and several people have stopped by specifically to meet her since it aired.

"I think every time Louisville is on a national show we get a little more attention and a little more clout," Pettry said. "Not that Louisville's better because it's on the show, it just brings more people here to see what people are doing."

Pettry said she has noticed that more men, in general, run kitchens in Louisville. But she doesn't want to be recognized just because she's female.

"Women are strong, it's not that big of a deal," Pettry said. "When talking about chefs, it should be what they're doing, what they're bringing to the plate rather than if they're a woman or a man."

Gavin, who graduated from Sullivan University and worked for Bourbons Bistro before auditioning for "Food Network Star," said it's still important to recognize that women in the industry can be looked over for management jobs or be paid less than their male counterparts.

"There are definitely some chefs out there that would be embarrassed to admit they're not paying women what they're worth," Gavin said. "I think they're conditioned to put women in that box even though they have the same skill set or even better."

In 2014, Bloomberg restaurant critic Ryan Sutton published an article examining gender issues within the industry and found that women occupied just 6.3 percent, or 15 out of 160 head chef positions, at 15 prominent U.S. restaurant groups.

At that time, Sutton pointed out, "Top Chef" head judge Tom Colicchio didn't employ any women as head chef at his eight eateries, despite his show featuring a balanced mix of chefs of both genders.

Three years later, men still lead all of Colicchio's seven remaining

The increase in female chefs on TV "makes women realize being a chef isn't only a male's occupation. It's inspiring women now to see it as an option. ... On career day, I had kids dressing up as teachers/chefs.

TEACHER BRANDI MUDD WHO APPLIED TO "MASTERCHEF" IN 2016



MASTERCHEF FACEBOOK PHOTO

Kentucky elementary school teacher Brandi Mudd has made it to the Top 12 contestants on FOX television's "MasterChef."



PROVIDED

Louisville chef Damaris Phillips appears on Food Network's "Cutthroat Kitchen."



FILE

Kristina J. Addington was first vegan chef winner on "Cutthroat Kitchen."

KENTUCKY CHEFS ON TELEVISION

A Courier-Journal review of contestants featured on national cooking competitions found that more than 20 area chefs have made their way into the spotlight, including:

- » **Edward Lee**, Louisville — Top Chef Season 9, Iron Chef America, MasterChef Season 7 guest judge
- » **Damaris Phillips**, Louisville — Food Network Star Season 9, Cutthroat Kitchen superstar sabotage, Guy's Grocery Games judge, Southern at Heart
- » **Loreal Gavin**, Indianapolis (now in Louisville) — Food Network Star Season 10, Cutthroat Kitchen Season 8
- » **Ranada West-Riley**, Lexington — Cutthroat Kitchen Season 11, Guy's Grocery Games
- » **Jason Smith**, Grayson — Holiday Baking Championship, upcoming Food Network Star Season 13
- » **Brandi Mudd**, Irvington — MasterChef Season 7
- » **Daniel "Dan" Wu**, Lexington — MasterChef Season 5
- » **Annie Pettry**, Louisville — Top Chef Season 14
- » **Kristina J. Addington**, Louisville — Cutthroat Kitchen Season 7
- » **Cherise Johnson**, Madisonville — Cutthroat Kitchen Season 6

restaurants, though he does employ several women as head pastry chefs.

Louisville chefs who've participated in televised competitions vary in their opinions on how the shows have affected their careers.

Gavin — who made it to the top five in her season of "Food Network Star" and who recently published "The Butcher Babe Cookbook" — said she wants to put the show behind her and instead establish opportunities based on her cooking skills.

"It opened up a lot of doors and closed a lot of doors," Gavin said of the show. "It's been hard climbing

back up the chef hill to prove my validity as a professional in this industry. ... There are a lot of chefs out there who like sitting in a makeup chair and are worried about that. I'd rather that my food speaks for itself."

V-Grits co-founder Addington, said she thinks winning an episode of "Cutthroat Kitchen" in 2014 was a great starting point for her vegan business and encouraged people to take her more seriously.

"As a vegan chef, that's even more niche, so we had a huge following instantly," Addington said. "When we did a Kickstarter, said we're starting this food truck, we

- » **Alexis Hernandez**, Clarksville, Ind. — Food Network Star Season 6
- » **Anthony Lamas**, Louisville — Beat Bobby Flay Seasons 1 & 6
- » **Kathy Cary**, Louisville — Beat Bobby Flay Season 4
- » **Lynn Winter**, Louisville — Throwdown with Bobby Flay Season 1
- » **Joe and John Castro**, Louisville — Throwdown with Bobby Flay Season 2
- » **Darnell Ferguson**, Louisville — Guy's Grocery Games
- » **Alison Settle**, Louisville — Guy's Grocery Games
- » **Maria Bell**, Louisville — Guy's Grocery Games
- » **Catherine McCord**, Louisville — Guy's Grocery Games judge 2013-2017
- » **Natalie Blake**, Harrodsburg — Hell's Kitchen Season 9
- » **Sarah Anthony**, Hodgenville — Cake Wars
- » **Meghan Smith**, Berea — Cake Wars
- » **James Brown**, Lexington — Cupcake Wars, Next Great Baker Season 3
- » **Heather Priest**, Stamping Ground — Chopped
- » **Todd Richards**, Louisville — Iron Chef America
- » **Ashley Holt**, Louisville — Next Great Baker Season 3

already had attention and media built in from being on the show so recently."

V-Grits launched its truck in 2015 and has since added a line of grocery store products and prepared meals. Addington said she hopes to add a cafe this year.

She encourages anyone interested in participating in a cooking show to apply.

"If you do get on, use it to your advantage," Addington said. "It can really be a once in a lifetime opportunity."

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