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Hell Yes

GORDON RAMSAY SURVIVOR
TRIUMPHS WITH BIG AND LITTLE'S

By Michael Nagrant

THE ONLY THING I'M MORE ASHAMED OF than my Hot Pocket addiction is that I wasted hundreds of hours of my life watching the television cooking battle royale, "Hell's Kitchen." Host Gordon Ramsay, the vicious foul-mouthed Brit who has more angry scowl lines on his face than a geriatric Shar Pei, is a terrible man. If you're not familiar, and if you aren't, you should be proud, Ramsay's a decorated Michelin-starred chef from Britain who made his bones in America dehumanizing a long procession of cooks on TV, calling them animal names (donkey, his favorite) or inanimate objects ("fucking donut," my favorite).

Mostly Ramsay's continuing the cycle of French-brigade-begotten kitchen violence and dealing with daddy issues he hasn't resolved with his own mentor Marco Pierre White (a legendary chef who's machismo makes Anthony Bourdain look about as tough as Kim Kardashian) who was rumored to once have had the young Ramsay slumped in the corner of his kitchen crying on the floor.

But, as when an Elvis-impersonating governor allegedly sells an effing golden United States senate seat or a lieutenant governor nominee maybe assaults his prostitute girlfriend with a knife, "Hell's Kitchen" is just one more train wreck from which it's tough to look away.

Thus engaged, I'd hoped to learn something, but the lessons, other than, say, avoid working for kitchen dictators who wield large sharp knives, were few. One lesson I'd thought immutable is that the contestants on the show, a motley assortment of home chefs, journeyman line cooks and burned-out business professionals trying to reinvent themselves, could actually cook. Unlike "Iron Chef" or "Top Chef," where a bed-head style hairdo and, more importantly, real kitchen chops are required, a long history of psychotherapy seemed to be the only pre-requisite for a "Hell's Kitchen" contestant.

Consider Tony D'Alessandro, co-owner of the three month old Near North takeout spot Big and Little's, who was eliminated on season six of "Hell's Kitchen." D'Alessandro's only real certified claim to cooking fame was teaching Williams Sonoma's in-store cooking classes. By the second episode, D'Alessandro (it should be noted his dark Buddy Holly frames and Fantasia Barrino-inspired asymmetric hairdo would have made him perfect for "Top Chef" too) went down like the RMS Lusitania on his fish station. He also displayed a little bit of mania when he aped John Dillinger during an on-camera interview and compared Ramsay's screaming to blowing everyone away with a machine gun.

D'Alessandro, though, totally gets credit for manning up and nominating himself for elimination that episode, which unlike the phrase "I'm not here to make friends," rarely happens on reality-television competition. Still, after Ramsay took his jacket and spiked it on a meat hook and his head shot spontaneously burst into flames (a staged bit that happens for each eliminated contestant on the show), D'Alessandro redeemed himself with some vintage reality-television denial by suggesting he still had the "palate of a god."

Subconsciously, I guess that's why I took a while to get over to D'Alessandro's new spot, which he co-owns with his buddy Gary Strauss. I didn't think it would be very good. It turns out I was a stupid donkey.

Though there's one on seemingly every corner, Big and Little's is currently one of the best corner takeout joints in Chicago. Though they don't have an Italian beef, their big juicy hamburger patties (fresh meat ground each day—never frozen) are griddled to your desired doneness and seasoned to order. The big airy sesame bun (which they don't make in-house) as well as the beef gets perfect cross-hatch grill marks. At \$4.50 it's almost half the price of the vaunted DMK burger, and at least a third more satisfying and juicy.

Fresh-cut fries, blanched, fried to order, and ceremoniously tossed with salt in a big silver bowl counter-side are as good as the frites at stalwarts like Hot Doug's or Susie's Drive in. If you want cheese on that, they don't microwave a plastic nacho-cheese packet, but melt actual cheese in a pot and drizzle it on that pile of almost mahogany dark spuds. That is to say, unlike most spots which are using pre-made frozen nuggets and bricks from commercial food distributors, these guys really cook real food.

Like Ramsay, D'Alessandro deals with his past pretty overtly, as half the menu features fish. I don't know if he has the palate of a god, but D'Alessandro can definitely cook the squid ink out of seafood. His shrimp taco features a smoky grilled corn tortilla swaddling smartly butterflied tender shrimp halves swimming in a spicy mayo sauce, while his fish and chips made from fresh cod are flakier than a potential love child from Joaquin Phoenix and Paula Abdul. The crab on the corn tostada, which sat on a nice, crispy, freshly fried corn shell, could have been a bit more flavorful, but most importantly, it wasn't fishy.

Really, the only thing I think these guys got wrong is the name of the place, for Strauss (Big) isn't really that big and D'Alessandro (Little) is not that tiny. But, then again, Medium and Slightly Larger doesn't really sound that good. That being said, one thing's for sure: it sure don't mean a thing if you can't stand the heat in "Hell's Kitchen."

Big and Little's, 939 North Orleans, (312)943-0000

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