

## TV Review: 'Top Chef: Texas' Switches Recipe on Reality Hit

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on November 2, 2011 - 9:16am

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CHICAGO – Some fans are going to want to send back the latest offering from Chef Tom Colicchio and the team behind Bravo's Emmy-winning "Top Chef." At first, it's a little baffling to see one of the most acclaimed reality programs of all time switch up its formula this notably with a series of starting challenges that will remind viewers of "American Idol." But I believe fans can adjust and have faith in Colicchio and his belief that the new structure will create the most intense competition yet. It's a new sauce but it's ultimately the same amazing dish.



Television Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Everything's bigger in Texas, so why not start "Top Chef: Texas" with a GIGANTIC cast? When 29 chefs show up at the Alamo to be greeted by the lovely Padma Lakshmi, the smart ones know something unusual is up. They can't possibly have that many Elimination Challenges. The season would last until May. There's going to need to be carnage right from the start.

The chefs who have seen the show before correctly nail that a standard "Top Chef" season features 16 contestants. That means 13 chefs won't even get a chance to truly compete in Quickfires and real Elimination Challenges. But it gets even more complicated than that. The chefs are split into three "heats" and given hour-long cooking challenges to present to the judges. The first group of judges includes Colicchio, Lakshmi, and new regular Emeril Lagasse. The second group of judges swaps out Emeril for Gail Simmons. The third heat takes place in the next episode. (And "Top Chef Masters" scene-stealer Hugh Acheson will also be a regularly rotating judge this season but is not featured in the premiere.)



Top Chef: Texas  
Photo credit: Bravo

In small groups of 3-5, the chefs present their dishes to the judges and they're either given a "yes," "no," or "on the bubble," based on majority rule within the three critics. The final group will have to cook again to prove if they should stay or go. Of course, the feeling is not dissimilar from "American Idol" with golden tickets replaced by chef coats. The competition is instantly intense. Don't get something done in time? You're gone. Can't get your soup in the cup? Bye bye. There's even a chef told to pack his knives before he starts cooking anything. It's intense.



Top Chef: Texas  
Photo credit: Bravo

At first, that intensity seems misplaced. It would be nice to think that the chefs on "Top Chef" were hand-picked and putting them in a reality TV boat similar to the freaks on "Idol" gives the premiere a taste that will be off-putting to some. But I ask real fans of the show to think about not the cooking but the final product. Let's be honest: There have been some untalented chefs the last few seasons. The first month of the last couple of "Top Chef" installments has been nothing but trimming the fat of cooks who shouldn't have made it through the selection

process. I believe this is Colicchio trying to refine and improve that process. Isn't it likely that by putting the new chefs through the fire before actual competition starts will result in a stronger group of contestants?

As for stand-outs in the new season, I hate to say too much because I don't want to spoil who stays and who gets the sad look from Padma (although you should know that the audition process doesn't end in one night). In the group of 29, there are several chefs from Chicago, including ones from Spiaggia, Moto, and Topolobampo. The pedigree of contestants this year seems insane, including several James Beard nominees and chefs who have mentored with legends like Joel Robuchon and Rick Bayless. The crew seems remarkably young this year, almost as if the producers consciously sought out the next generation of masters.

"Top Chef: Texas" may remix the structure of "Top Chef" but the show's strengths remain the same — interesting challenges, a fantastic head judge & stellar host, and, most importantly, what's on the actual plate. The new structure takes a bit away from that final ingredient as the kitchen gets cluttered with new personalities but that won't be an issue in just a couple of weeks. Will there be more changes after that? Will they result in a more-talented contestant or a sub-par season? It's too soon to tell but I have faith in "Top Chef," still the best cable reality show.

*"Top Chef: Texas" stars Tom Colicchio, Padma Lakshmi, Gail Simmons, Hugh Acheson, and Emeril Lagasse. It returns tonight, November 2nd, 2011, at 9pm CST on Bravo.*



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