



*Bobby Flay*

High Profile

The title 'all fired up' is rendered in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letters 'a' and 'l' are formed by the stems of two lit matches, with their purple heads positioned above the stems. The word 'fired' is in a standard font, and the 'u' and 'p' are also formed by the stems of two lit matches, with their purple heads positioned above the stems.

all fired up

BY JOY MANNING • PHOTOS BY JONATHAN PUSHNIK

# at

8:30 A.M., NEW YORK CITY'S SEVENTH AVENUE IS

mired in gridlock. Cars idle at red lights and office workers weave through traffic to make it to their desks on time. It's a disorganized blend of anxiety, movement and noise. But inside Bar Americain, Bobby Flay's newest Manhattan restaurant, the vibe is just the opposite. There's a hush among the skeleton crew of prep cooks who arrive at dawn to dice onions and simmer the stock for what will become the restaurant's menu of regional American dishes. Outside, an eager fan with a digital camera waits for Flay's arrival.

For 17 years, since opening his flagship restaurant Mesa Grill, Bobby Flay has helped invent the celebrity chef archetype with his cooking skills, approachability and undeniable charm; during the last decade he's marketed that persona beyond the Big Apple with the help of the Food Network.

In the early days, when producers recruited him to become a TV personality, Flay had to pay his own cab fare to and from the nascent network to film his first show, *Grillin' and Chillin'*. "Back in the day it was 22 minutes live to tape," he says. "They slapped the food on the table and started filming. It was so bad it was good."

Fast-forward 11 years to today. The media outlet that introduced America to Flay's casual air, likeability and star power now broadcasts some of the most sophisticated television on cable. The network's executives say they have Flay to thank for much of the success. "From the early days of Food Network, Bobby was always a great complement to our lineup," says Bruce Seidel, Food Network's senior vice president of program planning. "He's a recognizable force around the world for his bold flavors and strong personality that shines through the screen."

*Iron Chef America*, another show that features the Manhattan-born chef, has a 6,500-square-foot studio inside New York City's Chelsea Market, a production staff of 120, and the flashiest appliances and kitchen gadgets in existence. "There's a huge team of editors in post-production; it's nothing like the old days," says Flay of the show's high-tech gestalt.

His other Food Network gig, *Throwdown*, has garnered a legion of fans and impressive ratings. The concept for the show, Flay's own brainchild, pits him against another notable cook who's won accolades for a specific and usually regional dish. *Throwdown* has brought Flay to Philadelphia twice to battle the city's own culinary masters. He took on Tony Luke in a cheesesteak match (Luke's classic steak bested Flay's gourmet version) and Reading Terminal Market's Delilah's in a mac-and-cheese face-off (Flay's French techniques triumphed over Delilah's Velveeta-rich recipe).

A panel of judges—the group is typically made up of locals who are biased against Flay—decide which version is the winning dish, and the challenger most often takes home the prize. But playing the part of gracious loser is a role Flay says he relishes. "The whole idea is to show how good these people are," he explains.

It's not like Flay needs to win every time anyway. The dining public has long known how good he is in the kitchen. He's been refining his craft since age 17, when as a high school dropout he took a job at Joe Allen restaurant in New York's theater district. The owner was so impressed with the young Flay's talent and work ethic that he paid his tuition to the French Culinary Institute.

It was just a few years after graduation that Flay opened Mesa Grill and introduced America to the bold, chili-infused flavors of Southwestern cuisine. "When we first started Mesa Grill, no one knew what a chipotle was. Now there's a fast food chain named after it," says Flay. Indeed, because of him and other TV chefs, regular people can find a broader range of international foods and more specialty ingredients at the regular supermarket. *Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill Cookbook*, new this fall, will teach home cooks how to use the Southwestern ingredients that Flay has helped to popularize.

## A MAN AND HIS STEAK

Flay's closest restaurant to Philly, Bobby Flay Steak, opened just over a year ago at the Borgata and has the least Southwestern influence of any of the chef's six restaurants. The posh spot was part of a crop of celeb-studded, Vegas-esque restaurants to bring even more cachet to the stylish hotel and casino. Other chefs who've recently opened dining destinations include Michael Mina (Seablue) and Wolfgang Puck (American Grille). The restaurants, along with new nightclubs like Mur.mur, have attracted celebrity revelers and polished up Atlantic City's image, giving the town a new level of gloss and glamour. "It's exhilarating," says Flay.

But it wasn't the promise of a hungry, high roller clientele that brought Flay down the Shore. Atlantic City's location and history are what inspired the 43-year-old to create his first steak house—a new genre for his empire. "I wanted it to be the quintessential

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surf-and-turf restaurant," says Flay. In Atlantic City's Rat Pack era, when Frank Sinatra and his entourage frequented the Shore town, its streets were studded with places serving classic seafood-and-steak fare. "When creating my restaurants and menus, I'm much more inspired by sense of place than what the diners might like," says Flay.

Borgata execs may be pleased with the celeb chef's ability to draw in well-heeled crowds, but Flay says he's still figuring out the new Atlantic City scene. Of the nights he spends in the kitchen and patrolling the dining room at Bobby Flay Steak, he says, "The thing that surprises me most is that we have something of a neighborhood restaurant. We have regulars. People get in their cars in Philly and drive down just for dinner."

Unlike a lot of his counterparts, Flay notices when people make



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Meet Flay Nov. 1 when he stops by Williams-Sonoma at the King of Prussia mall to sign copies of *Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill Cookbook*.



## Queso Fundido with Roasted Poblano Vinaigrette

This is one of the all-time most requested recipes at Mesa Grill. And it's easy to understand why. I mean, what's not to like about melted, bubbly cheese topped with a green chile vinaigrette? The combination of tangy goat cheese and smooth Monterey Jack is irresistible. Serve this with piles of chips, because the dipping won't stop until the last dregs are gone.

Serves Four

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|---|---|
| 1 tablespoon unsalted butter                | 8 ounces fresh goat cheese, cut into 8 slices   |
| 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour              | 2 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro  |
| 1 cup whole milk                            | Roasted Poblano Vinaigrette (recipe at <a href="http://PhillyStyleMag.com">PhillyStyleMag.com</a> ) |
| 3 cups grated Monterey Jack cheese (12 oz.) | 1 9-ounce bag good quality tortilla chips   |
| ¼ teaspoon kosher salt                      |   |
| ⅛ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper      |   |

1. Preheat the broiler.
2. Melt the butter in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Whisk in the flour and cook for 1 minute. Whisk in the milk and cook until slightly thickened. Remove from the heat and stir in the grated Monterey Jack cheese; season with the salt and pepper.
3. Scrape the mixture into an 8-inch cast-iron pan and place the slices of goat cheese over the top. Put the pan under the broiler and broil until the goat cheese is golden brown on top. Remove from the oven, drizzle with the poblano vinaigrette or spoon it over the top, and sprinkle with the chopped cilantro. Serve with chips for dipping.

*Excerpted with permission from Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill Cookbook*

regular appearances in his restaurants, mainly because he shows up regularly as well. "I'm at Bobby Flay Steak at least four nights a month, more in the summer," he says. Flay's presence in the kitchen guarantees that the food measures up to his perfectionist standards—the ones that have cemented the chef's stellar reputation in the culinary world.

And though he admittedly spends a lot of time playing TV star, Flay asserts that his true passion remains cuisine. When aspiring chefs ask Flay how to get on the Food Network he tells them, "If you want to be on TV, go to acting school." But, he adds, hungry young chefs who care more about food than fame will always find work in Flay's kitchens. ■