

**Chef Abby Hitchcock: Behind the Scenes of *Chopped***  
**A reality show originally aired on The Food Network, April 29, 2010**

“Meet at the diner. Bring your passport and your knives. 6 am, don’t be late. Ask for Alfonso.” It all sounds a bit dodgy, but it’s been months in the making. It’s time to film my episode of the Food Network’s *Chopped*. Evidently TV starts early.

My alarm goes off, followed by parents’ phone calls and texts. I’m up — not too bad because I’m a morning person; the nerves that are setting in help too. I rowed on the crew team in college so rising at 5 am is something I was, at one time, used to. But now that I own two restaurants, it’s more likely I’m just shutting my eyes at that hour.

It’s still pitch-black outside when I arrive at the diner, and Alfonso (who in another script would have been big and scary, is anything but) leads me and three other chefs to the studio, a block away. Inside there’s already plenty of activity, all the moving parts being coordinated, lots of walkie-talkies. (We’re told this is a *small* crew.) We’re offered a hot breakfast. I’m the only one who partakes. I always wake up ready to eat, and I know I need the energy.

We’re huddled in the hallway, and we introduce ourselves. There are two men and two women, something we all note, because in our “research” none of us have seen an episode with two women. Cool. We’re having a jolly time, although it’s a bit surreal to be standing in a windowless hallway at 6:15 am friendly chit-chatting with three chefs, when soon we’ll be competing against one another.

Next stop, the “Sequester Room.” This is where we spend most of our time, our comings and goings carefully monitored. (When we’re not being filmed, the judges might be, and we can’t be in the camera shot.) The room is actually a kitchen, and we sit at the table and talk awkwardly (nerves, and one doesn’t want to give anything away — whatever *that* would be—we’re cooking not appearing on *Jeopardy*). We’re asked questions to keep us off the topic of food. Only later, when the cameras are on us, so when we talk food, it feels fresh. We get the rundown on timing. The first competition will begin at 8:30. Gulp. For some reason this makes it all seem real.

Waves of anxiety hit. I just want to get to the cooking. That’s what I love, after all. I didn’t apply to the show for the prize money—not that I’d throw it away! It was the challenge. Could I get on? Could I compete? (Hey—maybe A Star Is Born!) And there’s always the thrill of the unknown, something new.

Time to be shown the set, a large kitchen with four cooking stations. We’re put in careful order, which we will keep throughout the taping. Odd to see the set I’ve only seen on TV until now. It’s smaller than I’d imagined. Much smaller. I’m at station 2. For some reason, I like station 2. The pantry is huge, well-stocked with foods to supplement the “Mystery Basket” of ingredients we’ll be given, and there’s all kinds of equipment. (I

wonder how often the ice cream machine really gets used.) With no windows anywhere, time passes differently. The anticipation is getting to us. Back in the Sequester Room, we all agree: we just want to get this first round done.

It's time. I'm ready. The Challenge: cook an appetizer using the ingredients in the Mystery Basket, in any amount, and use them all. Grab whatever else you need from the pantry. We are lined up, in order, and led on stage. My competitors are all very different: one is über-competitive and didn't sleep the night before the taping. Another never stops fidgeting and talking; the producers keep asking him to remember to stand on the floor marker. The last is nervous but cool. We practice opening our Mystery Baskets without actually opening them. The cameramen—seemingly hundreds of them (we're reminded that this is a *small* crew)—swoop in to tape us like a well-choreographed dance troupe.

Here's the scene. Four chefs at their stations facing the many cameras and judges. To our right is the host, standing. The judges are seated, watching us. To our left is the spacious pantry area. Each stove has a pot of boiling water. The oven is set to Very Hot. Our knives have been brought to us. The huge digital timer is set to 20 minutes in bold red numbers. It looms. Mystery Baskets are ready.

Countdown and GO!

Open basket: Olive loaf (gag!), collards (yum, long cooking time), jumbo shrimp (yum!) and corn chips (Fritos, but generic, no brands allowed). Fritos??? That's the weird one.

Here's my thinking. We have 20 minutes to make 4 appetizer portions. I start peeling the shrimp as I formulate my dish in my head. I hear the judges discussing us. The Fidgeter won't stop talking, but I'm in my zone and don't let anyone get in my way. Nervous-But-Cool is no longer so cool. Mr. Competitive is working fast and going to the pantry a lot. I grab vegetable oil, since the oil on our stations is extra virgin—come on, people, when will you learn that's not a high-heat oil?? I go to the pantry only once; the others seem to go more often.

OK, I've got what I'm going to make. As vile as olive loaf is (pink, rubbery, salty “pork product” studded throughout with pimiento-stuffed olives, in case you're not familiar), from a chef's perspective it's salty and has some meat flavor. In the South collards are braised with bacon or ham as a matter of course. That's where I'm starting, because collards take a while, I better slice them fine. They are braising away. I start a shrimp stock. I don't know what I'm going to use it for, but let's get some flavor out of those shells. The corn chips: it's too obvious to make a crust and I don't like Fritos enough to let them have such high billing. What can they lend to my appetizer then? Crunch, salt, a little sweetness.

OK, I'm going to make a salad and finish it with finely chopped corn chips. I hope this will be interesting to the judges, but I don't care; I'll be innovative with the rest of the

dish. The shrimp are quite large. I start to sauté them. I glance at the clock. Everyone acts absolutely crazed. I feel focused and that I'm OK. Judgment time is later. Just keep focused. I make a warm vinaigrette using the shrimp stock. I chop peppers for crunch, color and sweetness. I add baby arugula and toss with the vinaigrette to wilt it slightly. Less than 2 minutes left. I have grabbed bowls to plate my appetizer. I start to toss the chips into the salad but think better of it. They'll get soggy. I'll sprinkle them on top. Set the collards in the bowls. Top with shrimp and then the warm arugula salad. 4 seconds to spare. Done, hands up!

It looks pretty good, I think. Silence. Long camera shots. And then I see it. My chips didn't get sprinkled. Deep, dark, sinking feeling. I see another chef make a face like something went wrong.

We are trundled off the set in our special order. The others say it was much, much harder than they expected. I don't feel that way at all. It was exactly what I'd anticipated. To my amazement, I was getting into the *competition* part of it. I really want to make it to the next round. Before, I had just wanted to make it onto the show. Then I just wanted not to slice my finger off on national TV. Having accomplished those goals, something has taken over. Now I really want to make it to the next round.

An eternity passes. We're all talking. We're very critical of ourselves. I realize that the tiny amount of chips that did make it into the salad will never create the taste I was going for. The producers tell us to defend ourselves. Don't just take the criticism. We're called back.

I dread the judging. We're lined up in front of the judges. On TV they always seem *so* mean. I find they are actually very complimentary. It makes me feel really good to have well-known chefs taste my food and say they like it. It reminds me that I know what I'm doing. It's a validation. Their main criticism is (1) forgetting the chips and (2) not deveining the shrimp. I was able to explain about saving the chips till the end so they wouldn't get soggy. (Damn it, though, that was such a dumb mistake!) The deveining thing was totally off my radar, I must admit. At the restaurant I use smaller shrimp. I check them, but they almost never have a vein. (Much to my surprise the next two chefs didn't devein either!)

We march back off the set to let the judges confer. My brain is fast-forwarding to how they'll edit the show so they'll seem cruel on TV. Then we're marched back on. Now the bowline knot in my stomach signals that I'm a nervous wreck. I know that forgetting an ingredient means I'm toast.

And I'm right. I'm the first one "Chopped!"

Lots of hugs from the other chefs. Then a long, long post-show interview. Now it's done. All those months leading up to the show, and it's over just like that. I arrived at 6 am, spent 6 hours to cook for 20 minutes and that's that.

I walk out into the winter sunshine. What a day, and it's only noon. I'm sad to not have won or at least made it to the second round. But it was an accomplishment to get on the show in the first place. And it was a great experience.

I never liked Fritos anyway.