

# CHASING BOCUSE


*America's Journey to the Culinary World Stage*

**PHILIP TESSIER**

with contributions from Ment'or Founders

**DANIEL BOULUD, THOMAS KELLER, AND JÉRÔME BOCUSE**



 **PRESTEL**



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# PHILIPPE,

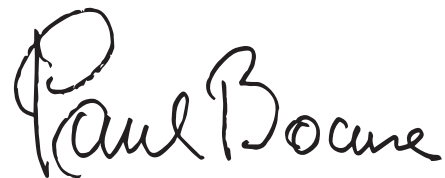
**I HAVE JUST LEARNED** about the forthcoming book celebrating your culinary achievements. On this occasion, I want to tell you once again how very enthusiastic I am about your wonderful second-place finish at the Bocuse d'Or in 2015. It gave me great personal pleasure to see you awarded for this achievement.

Since 1987, American teams have competed one after the other, and at last we see the results we desired. The whole world knows of my attachment to America. This is why I am delighted to hear of this great step forward, which generates interest in, and suggests a new image for, gastronomy across the cities of your great country.

I send my greetings to your mentor, Thomas Keller, whose contributions—along with those of Daniel Boulud and Jérôme Bocuse, as the three leaders of the Ment'or BKB Foundation—have guided the performance of your team. I am pleased to see America's most renowned chefs continue to work together to develop America's best young talent.

From this point forward, cuisine, as practiced by chefs in the United States, will take on a new dimension, and you have been instrumental as a leader in this venture.

**BRAVO!**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Bocuse". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "P".



*Steve Bone*

*[Signature]*

*Chiqui de Santul*

JÉRÔME BOCUSE

## THE BIRTH OF A CULINARY TRADITION

**M**Y FATHER, PAUL BOCUSE, has always been a man of incredible vision and charisma, passionately driven to reach beyond the borders of his own Lyonnaise kitchen to embrace the world. That might not seem extraordinary in today's landscape of celebrity chefs, pop-up restaurants, and social media, but in the 1970s and '80s, it was revolutionary. Monsieur Paul, as he is affectionately known, was the first chef of his day to step out of the kitchen, becoming an ambassador of the culinary brigade to his guests, and of French cuisine to the world, around which he frequently traveled.

Those same instincts led him to create a culinary competition for restaurant chefs, the Bocuse d'Or (Golden Bocuse). I remember the first years of the contest, as we struggled to enlist sponsors and even chefs to participate. If that sounds difficult, just imagine attempting it in the days before cell phones and the Internet. And yet, thanks to the global network he had developed, he was able to gather chefs from twenty-four countries together in one place and provide a stage on which they could compete. I'll never forget those formative days when, at the age of eighteen, I helped in any capacity I could, even rummaging through the CDs in my car to find a suitable soundtrack for the competition and ceremony.

Over the next two decades, I watched as the Bocuse d'Or developed from those humble beginnings into the most prestigious culinary competition in the world, drawing the world's best chefs to Lyon every two years to compete for gold. Winners of the Bocuse d'Or are now congratulated by their country's political leaders and achieve celebrity status overnight. Nations that have medaled repeatedly, such as Norway, Denmark, France, and Sweden, have created organizations that train and develop chefs from a young age, preparing them for the rigors and intensity of the competition.

Each year I travel internationally, overseeing the continental selections where countries must qualify in order to compete at the final in Lyon. The energy and enthusiasm that even the smallest countries demonstrate—as they compete against the powerhouses that consistently excel—is a tribute to the power of ambition and belief. It is clear how grateful they are for the privilege and opportunity to represent their country before the world. Today, more than sixty countries vie for the twenty-four spots in the final. Once in Lyon, they compete for the chance to mount the podium—an incredibly difficult achievement—where judges award only three teams the bronze, silver, and gold medals.

Today, more than sixty countries vie for the twenty-four spots in the final.





ANDREW FRIEDMAN

## ALL THE DRAMA IS ON THE PLATE

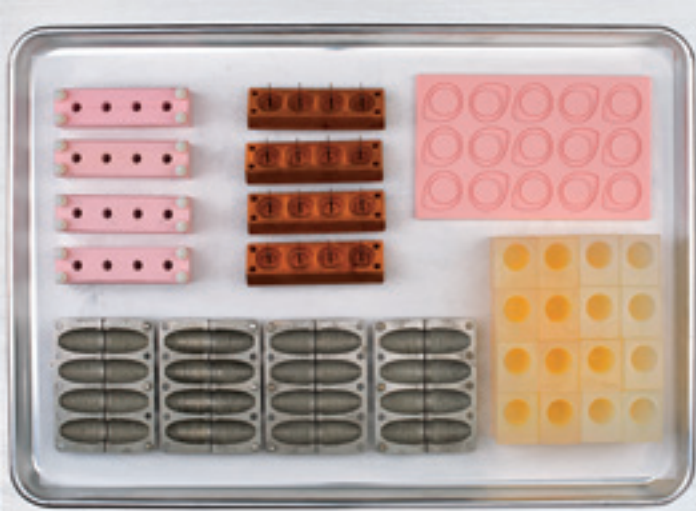
**C**ASUAL OBSERVERS of the Bocuse d'Or, including the occasional journalist, refer to it as “the real *Top Chef*.”

With no disrespect to *Top Chef*, or to any televised cooking shows—some of which have introduced genuine talent to the world—the Bocuse d'Or is a different animal altogether. Generally speaking, TV competitions are based on how the “cheftestants” respond to spontaneous challenges, often resulting in improvisational, seat-of-the-pants creativity. It's undeniably entertaining, but has little in common with the Bocuse d'Or, for which candidates know what the challenge will be months in advance, enabling them to meticulously plan what they will cook and serve, with one recent exception. In 2013, the Bocuse d'Or introduced an element of spontaneity by asking candidates to select ingredients from a market on the eve of the competition. My personal theory is that the adjustment was a nod to the pressures of contemporary entertainment; the fundamentals of the event remain intact, but even the Bocuse d'Or has to bend a little to keep up with the times. And besides, what chef hasn't had to make an adjustment “on the fly” when supplies of a particular ingredient are depleted, or to whip up something special for a VIP in the house?

Many televised cooking competitions are also categorized as “reality” shows, with interpersonal dynamics (often heightened by group living situations) impinging on what transpires in the kitchen. By contrast, in the Bocuse d'Or, there are no interviews with the emcees, no ESPN-style biographical videos, and precious little interaction among the candidates save for a welcome reception and group photo. There is nothing but the cooking, the finished product, and the judging.

In short, in the Bocuse d'Or, all of the drama is on the plate. The candidates live and die not by personality or gimmick, catchphrase or getup, but rather by their creativity, technique, organization, and composure—the same things that determine success for any self-respecting chef.

The Bocuse d'Or continues to attract top talent from around the world because it asks chefs to do what they got into the business to do in the first place: cook. That shouldn't be an extraordinary thing, but at a time when success is often determined by style over substance, it's a crucial distinction that makes this competition—which seems antiquated to so many—as relevant as ever.







# THE HOPE OF A NATION

*“Success occurs when opportunity meets preparation.”*

—ZIG ZIGLAR

**A**S WE PUSHED THROUGH the hotel doors onto the dimly lit streets of Lyon, the damp 5 A.M. chill brought a welcome alertness.

It was hard to believe that “D-Day”—our nickname for the finals of the Bocuse d’Or, the world’s most prestigious cooking competition—had finally arrived. Though I’d thought of little else for the past two years, it still felt distant, even in the homestretch. My thoughts flitted between what got us here and what lay ahead. With a history of dashed hopes for American teams, the odds had been stacked against us since the very beginning. The resulting low expectations offered cover if we failed, but our expectations for *ourselves* were high; they had to be because the commitment we’d made was absolute.

We crammed our rental vehicles full of equipment and began the thirty-minute drive to the expo. Our coach, Gavin Kaysen, took the wheel of my SUV so my commis (apprentice), Skylar Stover, and I could try to relax in the back. Completing our convoy, our support team, Will Mouchet and Greg Schesser, followed close behind in the truck with all of our remaining kitchen equipment. The rest of the coaching team and support staff would meet us at the expo.

At the outskirts of the city, the Saône River, lamplight streaking its placid waters, offered a calm contrast to my quickening pulse. The journey to this point had been one of discovery and determination, risk and reward. I thought of everything we had invested in the competition: leaving our full-time jobs, eighteen months of development, ten thousand man-hours of training, and untold resources.

It was all about to culminate in a single meal, a five-and-a-half-hour culinary performance. There would be just one round, one chance, with the world watching. To combat the gathering sense of momentousness, I mentally reviewed our preparation: every list, every recipe, every piece of equipment. We had meticulously planned and rehearsed until we could prepare this meal in our sleep. I had long considered success to be the result of *opportunity meeting preparation*—our mantra over the past two years. We had done everything humanly possible to prepare for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: physical training, temperance, French lessons, hours of honing every move in multiple practice sessions. Win or lose, I had to finish knowing that I had left everything in the three-by-six-meter competition kitchen-box that awaited us.

At the same time, any number of things could still go wrong, just as they could in any kitchen during any service: equipment failures or human errors, such as a forgotten ingredient or a cut finger. Then there

were the competition-specific pitfalls. Misinterpreted rules were a perennial sore point with many Bocuse d'Or veterans in particular because their subjectivity had derailed past candidates, including the United States just two years earlier. Competitions were a different beast than restaurants; there were no reinforcements or extra ingredients available to remedy a misstep, and there was no opportunity to “make it up” to a customer. Additionally, in sharp contrast to the veterans representing many of the favored countries, some of whose chefs had been practicing for more than a decade, Skylar and I lacked competition chops. Despite all the time we'd spent preparing, we'd never put ourselves on the line this way, and we had never performed together as a team outside of our training. We were, to put it mildly, underdogs.

Two years prior, I had attended the Bocuse d'Or 2013 as a spectator. One moment in particular haunted me: a candidate (Bocuse d'Or-speak for “competitor”) was putting the finishing touches on his meat

platter when he dropped the tray holding one of his garnishes, sending his composure with it. He stared uncomprehendingly at the culinary wreckage on the floor before turning his attention back to his platter, but by then, failure was a *fait accompli*. A momentary slip had changed and sealed his fate; I bet he still relives it lying in bed at night.

The pressure had been ratcheted up another notch the night before, when Chef Thomas Keller, my mentor and one of the towering figures of American gastronomy, looked me in the eye during a send-off speech and said, “The hopes of the country rest on your shoulders.”

The honor of representing the United States had always been a double-edged sword: It was, of course, motivating and imbued the task at hand with privilege and excitement. But if I dwelled on it, the fear of failure could become almost crippling. I call on my faith in times like these—reminding myself that ultimately, nothing was in my control, which allowed



Chef Philip Tessier and team make final preparations.

me to find an inner peace. I recalled a verse I had memorized for moments like these: “Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident.”

It was quiet in the SUV, the calm before the storm. With each deep breath, I visualized a different phase of the competition, imagining myself executing the game plan, relying on muscle memory and the support and camaraderie of Skylar. When I opened my eyes, the lights of the expo were just poking through the thick, predawn fog.

### **ACTION!**

The loading zone was a virtual Babel: a dozen teams, each speaking a different language, unpacking and loading in, everything heightened by the potent alchemy of nerves and adrenaline. The chaos did not reflect the calm, orderly process the organizing committee had depicted during a briefing session the night prior. I directed Greg, who was driving our second truck with supplies, to park off to the side, as far from the drama as possible.

We unloaded our gear and reviewed the checklist, confirming that everything was in order in each of the food boxes. Thankfully all of the food appeared to have traveled without spoilage or damage. A few minutes later, a wiry, bespectacled member of the Committee hurried over, a bit jittery himself, and informed us we could begin unloading our truck. When I gestured toward the equipment already stacked on the carts behind me, his look of surprise was priceless. I guess we weren't the only ones stressed out this morning. He motioned for us to move everything to the internal staging area where each of the teams positioned their equipment before loading into their kitchens. We relocated everything, leaving Will and Greg to stand guard, and then Gavin, Skylar, and I made for the competitors' lounge.

Twenty-four teams compete in the Bocuse d'Or over two days, and the start times for the twelve countries cooking on each day are staggered to ensure a steady flow of finished dishes at the closing bell. In the lounge, we joined several teams anxiously waiting their turn. For all the planning we had done, there was one thing we hadn't organized well: breakfast. Our hotel room didn't have a kitchen, so instead of enjoying Skylar's corn cakes, as was tradition before a practice session back home, I had to settle for nothing but the stale, day-old sandwich I had forced down on the drive to the expo—hardly a breakfast of champions. I was thankful to find a fresh *pain au chocolat* and a bottle of water waiting for us in the lounge, one last hit of sustenance before the marathon ahead. I craved a cup of coffee, but my pre-run limit was one shot of espresso in the morning. I had squandered my daily allotment at the hotel, and the last thing I needed was the caffeine shakes.

There we sat, waiting to be called into battle. We reviewed the small changes we had made to incorporate the market visit and mystery vegetable selection, two components of the competition intentionally added only the night before to test quick thinking and performance under pressure. My buddy Nathan Daulton, our chief supporter throughout training, appeared from around the corner and motioned Skylar and me over. Over the last eighteen months, Nate had organized a support team to pray for the team during stressful times. Now, he offered a final prayer and gave us his trademark bear hug, then headed out to the viewing area. I was pleased that instead of anxiety, uncertainty, or doubt, Skylar and I were both eager to get started. All through our training, excitement and dread had wrestled within us both, but now excitement was winning. We felt as though we had been keeping a secret every day for the past year, one that we couldn't share until

carefully selected and identically sized potatoes, they scooped them out, turned the skins inside out, fried them to a golden crisp, and used them as a shell over another garnish. But what made the greatest impact on me had nothing to do with the food. It was instead the awe-inspiring, Zen-like mastery that Sweden's candidate, Tommy Myllymäki—a past silver medalist who was on the hunt for gold this time—displayed for the entire five and a half hours. With a crush of media bearing down on him, Myllymäki was a study in calm focus and efficiency as he methodically transitioned from task to task in a way that suggested he was cooking dinner for friends rather than competing in the qualifying event for the world's most prestigious culinary competition. I

had always imagined myself sprinting through our final routine, but Myllymäki showed me a new ideal, that of a marathon runner, pacing himself for the long haul. His example would serve as a North Star.

During the awards ceremony at the close of the second day, as we watched countries with Bocuse d'Or pedigrees pick up their prizes (Sweden—first; Denmark—second; Norway—third), Rachel turned to me, eyebrows raised, and with a smile offered an unconvincing, “Good luck.”

Her tone said it all. We'd all have to push ourselves to another level, both in food and design. To compete with what we'd just seen, we had a steep mountain to climb.

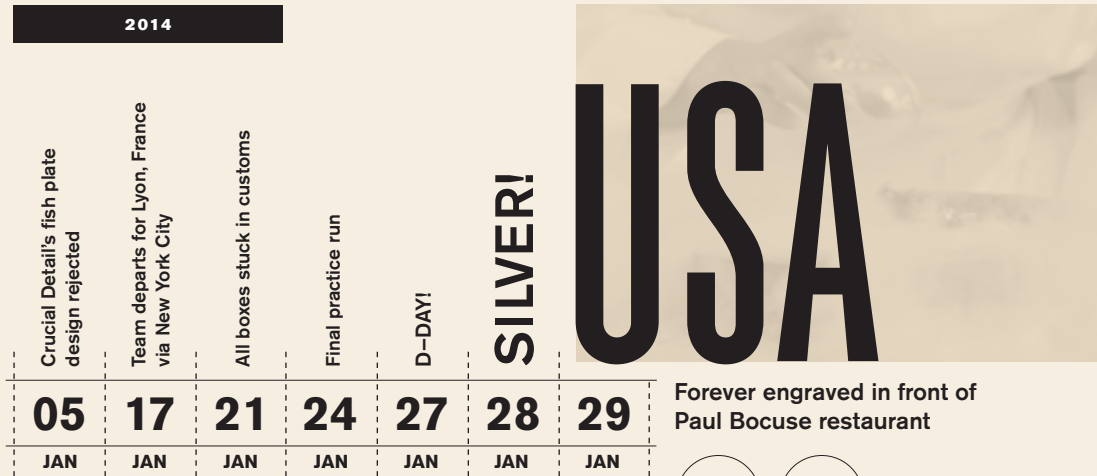
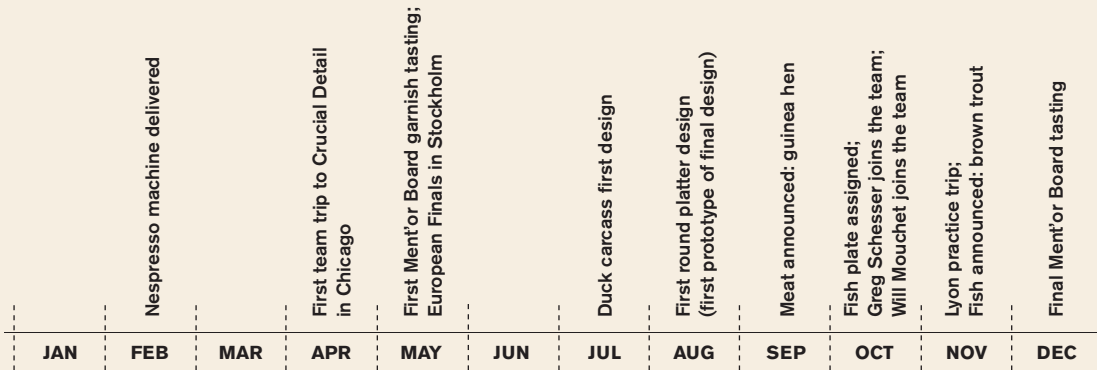
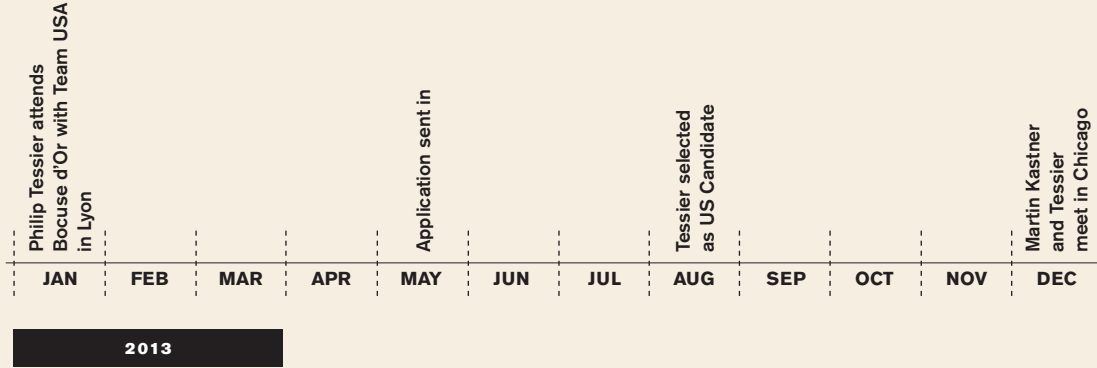


Tessier in The French Laundry culinary garden, Yountville, California.



# Team USA | January 2013–January 2015

## THE JOURNEY TIMELINE



**24**  
Months

**1**  
Team

2015

**WAS EATING LUNCH WITH A FRIEND AT** Odge's, a quintessential Chicago hot dog place near my studio where cops gather and gangbangers get takeout. Buy four hot dogs, get one free. It's a place with soul. My phone rang. It was Gavin Kaysen, then the executive chef of Café Boulud in New York City and the coach of Team USA for the Bocuse d'Or 2015. His pitch was simple and direct: "The United States has never placed. I feel this time, with this team, we have a real chance, and we'd like you on board. The competing chef will be in Chicago soon. Meet with him." I am pretty sure he added, "This competition is like a drug." But that may have been later on.

"What makes you think I could be helpful?" I asked Phil when he came by a couple of weeks later.

"I'm a traditionalist at heart. I have a feeling I know what my food will look like. I'm looking for someone who will challenge that," he answered.

I often say that when someone approaches me knowing exactly what they want, I don't take the project. I see design as a process, one that begins with a stare into an abyss, and then a jump in. It's a risk. If we believe we know what the concrete end result of a collaboration should be, then we're not approaching the problem we're facing with a truly open mind. Sometimes the best solution is not doing anything; other times it is changing the path midway as we recognize that something isn't working.

Phil was serious, organized, composed. In this sense, the exact opposite of me. And he was asking for a challenge. Sometimes a long journey starts with soggy fries and a Polish sausage with everything, two sport peppers and all.

# SOGGY FRIES AND A POLISH WITH EVERYTHING

MARTIN KASTNER | CRUCIAL DETAIL



Tessier and Martin Kastner at the Crucial Detail studio in Chicago.



## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE X FACTOR

*“There is no creativity in comfort.”*

—MARTIN KASTNER

**T**HE TEAM RETURNED from our trip with a healthy fear and renewed zeal and determination. This was especially true of Skylar, who, though he tried to hide it, was clearly intimidated by the performance of our competition. To add to the fuel, I would occasionally show him pictures I had taken during the Euro Finals of the best commis and ask him, “Are you better than this guy?” I watched as over the next few months Skylar slowly overcame his dislike of exercise and discovered the benefits of fitness. Though he would never love our workouts, they came to shape his mental attitude and endurance.

## MOMENTUM

The start of summer brought a sense of urgency as we continued our work on the garnishes and set our sights on the next challenge: the protein. All candidates are assigned the same proteins (meat and fish) to work with, but they are not announced until well into the training timeframe, and the announcements are staggered. In 2014, the meat would be announced in September, which would be too long to wait; we had to get started now. I began to search for direction by first reviewing the proteins from the last decade of competition, discovering that no poultry had been selected since 2007. So rather than work on a variety of meats to be ready for anything—the approach favored by many other teams—I decided to focus our development work on poultry, specifically duck.

My gamble was that if we ended up with beef, veal, pork, or lamb, we would be getting out of the blocks at the same time as our competition; if a bird was assigned, we’d be miles ahead. To me, it was a no-brainer. We started developing different techniques for cooking duck, rolling terrines, developing skin crackers, layering the breast meat with sausages and other farces (stuffings), and examining how to best use every part: necks, gizzards, livers, skin, legs, breast, tenderloins, bones—everything. One of the things I had decided early on was that whatever the protein was, I wanted it to be the focal point of the platter and present it with as “natural” an appearance as possible. I had seen numerous competitors over the past years present some pretty wild food, but often it looked more interesting than it did delicious. I wanted the judges to ask themselves how I prepared the protein, not why.

We continued our work with the first three garnishes and began adding in other elements as well.

Service for the vegan dish went incredibly smoothly and the plates were nearly perfect. As they neared completion, I searched desperately for the head server. I had carefully explained to him the complex layering of the cloches, carrying of the magnets, and lifting of the lids. But he was nowhere to be found.

I had flashbacks to two years earlier when several of the servers had poured my mushroom consommé all over my trout dish instead of into the small glasses we had provided. It had been a costly mistake that had certainly affected our final score. I was determined nothing was going to fail this time, and after a momentary scramble at the pass to get the committee and servers to understand the process, the vegan plates were finished.

## LASER FOCUS

The next thirty-five minutes were a total blur. Matt and Harrison worked at top speed but with incredible precision. All of those practice runs clearly paid off. Despite the challenges we had faced, they exuded a calm sense of confidence and focus.

We had planned for me to guide the second commis through the foie gras garnish. Harrison brought everything up to the front where I could instruct him.

“Okay, Yoo,” I said. “Put one truffle down in the center. No, the center. Yes, there, just like that. Now repeat that with the rest. Grab the black-eyed peas, three per. With a spoon, lay them on the side. No, a spoon, not the tweezers. Quickly but carefully. Yes, yes, now go.” I instructed him as best I could without being able to physically touch anything.

By this time, Harrison was nearly finished with the carrot garnishes and Matt was working to finish the lobster and chicken, which had to go on the platter first.

Matt finished the lobsters and went to hook them on the platter at the base of the centerpiece. He set

the first two on and immediately they came loose. He switched to two different ones and they didn’t stay either. The heating of the shells in the oven had caused them to firm up and curl, and now they weren’t fitting on together.

Had we been on time, we would have had a few minutes to trim and adjust the shells. But the harsh reality was that we couldn’t lose a single second. He set them on the center of the platter as close to the centerpiece as he could and went back to grab the chickens.

Harrison set Yoo to finishing the carrot garnish with the greens and began bringing the foie gras and pea garnishes to the platter. Matt set the chickens in place and then turned his attention to the potatoes. With all the activity in front of me, I couldn’t tell if they were all coming off but I hoped desperately that they were.

Harrison was nearly finished with the pea garnishes and about to place the carrots on the platter when one of the pea garnishes fell over and scattered crumbs all over. He reacted immediately by scooping up the crumbs with a bowl scraper and wiping the platter with a polishing cloth. Fortunately there were no smudge marks when he was finished. While he plated the carrots, Yoo began to bring finished potato bases to the platter one at a time as Matt placed the truffle slices on them at breakneck pace.

The timekeeper had already come to our box and I called out to Matt and Harrison, “Ninety seconds guys. Ninety seconds!” The noise was deafening and we could hear the encouraging cheers of the more than three hundred American supporters who had been cheering us on all day.

“Thirty seconds!” I yelled across as Matt raced to finish the last two potatoes and Harrison laid the glass domes on top of each one. We were short only one potato shell and Matt had fried one of the



Final assembly of the pea crisp.







A culinary kaleidoscope: Team USA's 2017 meat platter.



Above: *Poulet de Bresse* and American lobsters, the centerpiece. | Opposite: Team USA's 2017 meat plate.





Above: The vellum cloche reveal. | Opposite: Team USA's 2017 vegan plate.



**A**FTER ALL THE PRACTICE, the actual competition was in a way kind of anticlimactic. I even slept well the night before. At that point we knew exactly what we were going to do. There had been some last-minute changes, but nothing major. And I was exhausted from the week—the travel, the practice, the time change. I went to bed early and got a good six or seven hours without any issue and woke up excited to go. I remember watching the woman who was giving us the countdown to begin. All of the fans were already surrounding us with loud cheers of encouragement. Right before she began the final countdown there was one last fist bump between the team to let each other know we were ready to go.

To see the crowd of people around us, the lights and the actual competition finally starting, it was everything I thought it would be. But once the clock starts ticking and you start cooking, everything else is blocked out and you're just doing your thing. I never looked up. It was just easier to look down, concentrate on the food, look at the kitchen behind you. Because of our countless practices, it just felt like we were at home; it felt like just any other day. We simply executed what we knew. That's where all that practice and training paid off.

## IN THE ZONE

MATHEW PETERS

potato glasses to serve as a base for the last one. Harrison quickly placed the last dome and with only ten seconds to go, the platter was lifted across the counter and it walked.

Though the platter was out the battle wasn't over yet. They still had the task of breaking down the platter onto individual plates for the judges at the carving table positioned at the end of the judging tables. With the timing between platters being only ten minutes, it would be a race to dismantle, portion, and plate the fourteen plates needed in the eight minutes we had trained for.

We knew we had pushed the boundaries of time for the platter to walk and that meant time at the carving table would already be cut short when they arrived. Matt and Harrison quickly cleaned down the counters, reset their aprons, grabbed the equipment they needed, and headed to the table where the

platter would be placed. They walked across the judging floor and disappeared into a sea of toques across the room. I could only stand there and wait (the rules stated the coach wasn't allowed at the plating table), trying to process what had just happened and how things would be perceived by the judges.

Harrison returned first, visibly frustrated, "Chef, you have no idea what just happened over there. They only gave us four minutes. I want to kill myself right now."

When Matt returned, it was clear Harrison had not exaggerated. He looked defeated, shaking his head as he went about cleaning. I noticed the tip of the chicken with the lobster mousse still sitting on the cutting board, evidence of the lack of time they'd had at the table. There was a somber mood as Will and the crew appeared at the back of the kitchen to assist in returning everything to the truck.



Peters places the *Poulet de Bresse* on the meat platter under the watchful eye of the kitchen jury.





# CORN NESTS

CORN SILK | POPPED SORGHUM | EGG | MAKES 16 NESTS

## INGREDIENTS

### CORN SILK

150 grams glucose syrup  
150 grams water  
10 ears corn, silk removed and reserved (harvested from young, very fresh corn)  
1 liter grapeseed oil, for frying

### SORGHUM

15 grams sorghum  
10 grams clarified butter  
1 gram kosher salt  
0.15 grams pimentón

### EGG

20 grams dried corn powder, ground and passed through a fine-mesh strainer  
0.26 grams kappa carrageenan  
0.26 grams iota carrageenan  
0.2 grams agar agar  
0.2 grams low acyl gellan  
66 grams whole milk  
66 grams water

6.5 grams unsalted butter

1 gram kosher salt

### SPECIALIZED EQUIPMENT

• One 16-cavity quenelle mold by Crucial Detail

### FINISHING

Gold luster

>>>

