

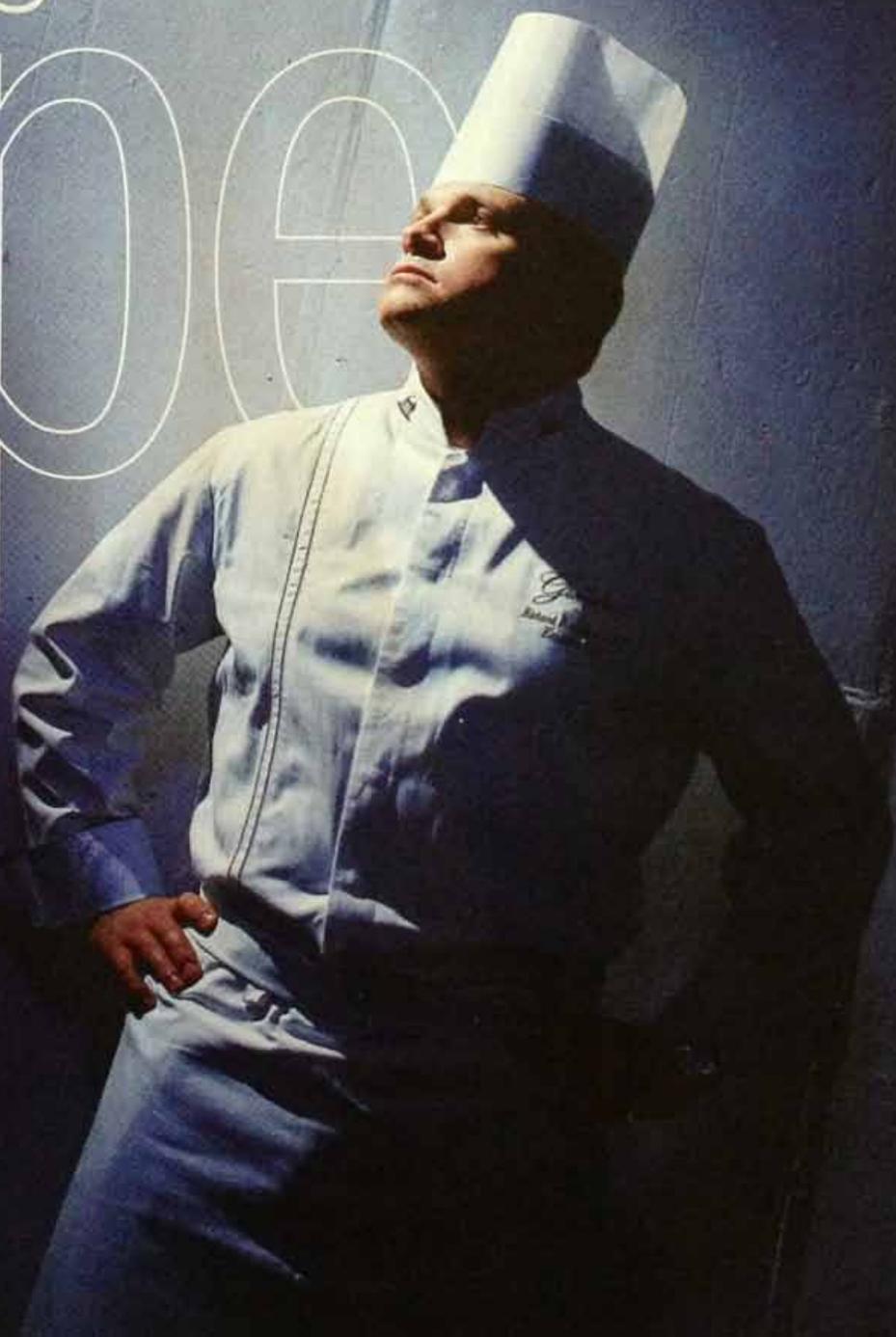
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WV

America's hope

This West Virginia chef is daring to do what no U.S. chef has ever done: Win the Bocuse d'Or

BY GREG JOHNSON P.14



W.Va. chef Richard Rosendale is out to win the Bocuse d'Or cooking competition



By Greg Johnson, Published: December 13

Deep in a bunker below the Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., two strategists in white uniforms huddle in a war room, fine-tuning a battle plan. Their mission would no doubt puzzle the Eisenhower-era officials who built this once-secret hideaway as a fallout shelter for Congress at the height of the Cold War. Declassified after it was exposed in 1992 in *The Washington Post* by journalist Ted Gup, the bunker has seen a variety of less dramatic uses, but perhaps none more intriguing than the project it currently houses: victory over the top chefs of Europe.

The Greenbrier's 37-year-old executive chef, Richard Rosendale, and his 21-year-old commis (assistant), Corey Siegel, will compete on Jan. 30 against chefs from 23 other countries in the world's most challenging and prestigious

culinary competition, the Bocuse d'Or, held every two years in Lyon, France.

U.S. teams have twice placed sixth in the competition's 25-year history, in 2003 and 2009, but no U.S. chef has ever claimed a gold, silver or bronze medal. Rosendale is determined to change this, and he and his commis are throwing themselves into the cause with the intensity of Olympic hopefuls.

By the time they emerge from their bunker and head for Lyon, they will have devoted hundreds of hours to preparation. Trainers have them weight lifting, running, biking, jumping rope and even boxing to get in shape for the grueling 5-hour, 35-minute event. The Bocuse d'Or USA Foundation, which is underwriting the campaign, estimates it will cost a half-million dollars.

Europeans — the French and Norwegians in particular — have dominated the Bocuse d'Or since its inception in 1987. In recent years, a dream team of U.S. culinary luminaries headed by Thomas Keller (the French Laundry in Yountville, Calif.), Daniel Boulud (Daniel in New York City) and Jerome Bocuse (Les Chefs de France at Florida's Epcot theme park) has taken up the challenge of putting America on the podium, lending their know-how, reputations and impressive fundraising muscle. A benefit at Boulud's flagship New York restaurant in March raised \$700,000, and a fantasy gift in the 2012 Neiman Marcus Christmas catalogue, offering dinner for 10 prepared by Keller, Boulud, Bocuse (son of the competition's founder, French chef Paul Bocuse) and Rosendale, has the potential to swell the war chest by \$250,000 more.

The torch was passed to Rosendale, a veteran of 48 national and international competitions, in January, when he won the Bocuse d'Or USA at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

"I knew my life had changed when I was driving home and I kept getting calls from the media," the Greenbrier chef recounts. "When I got back, I had 700 e-mails waiting."

Embracing his new role, with support from the Bocuse d'Or USA Foundation and Greenbrier owner Jim Justice, and equipment donated by sponsors, Rosendale installed a \$150,000 duplicate of the kitchen he will use in France in the fallout shelter's cafeteria. With a nod to history, he dubbed his practice facility the War Room.

But will all this expenditure of time, effort and money help capture an honor that has eluded a dozen other U.S. teams? An awful lot can go wrong in 5 1/2 hours of intense culinary creation, and it often does.

The Bocuse d'Or isn't your mother's pie-baking contest. Held in a sprawling exhibition hall filled with clamoring, unrestrained partisans, the scene resembles a World Cup final. Swiss fans have arrived armed with cowbells and engaged in a war of decibels with costumed, trumpet-blasting mariachis from Mexico. The unchecked enthusiasm can reach such deafening proportions that some teams have resorted to wearing earplugs and communicating by hand signals and scribbled notes.

All this hullabaloo began innocently enough 25 years ago, when famed French chef Paul Bocuse, a Lyon native, decided to sponsor an international cook-off to showcase rising culinary stars. A founding father of nouvelle cuisine, Bocuse is credited with helping the members of his profession emerge from the anonymity of the galley and gain respect and stature, not to mention celebrity and wealth.

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The iconic cuisinier was the ideal host for a global event. He had little trouble persuading his city, a gastronomic capital, to go along with the idea. A gifted promoter, Bocuse decided he could add excitement to his contest by holding it in front of a live audience.

The rules are precise: Each country's team must execute an elaborate meat platter and 14 individual fish plates, accented with three garnishes. Ideally, the food reflects the culinary heritage of the chef's country. Main ingredients are provided, and competitors work in 200-square-foot kitchens, lined up side by side. The results are paraded before 24 judges who award points for taste, presentation, geographic representation and kitchen skills.

Just as audience participation has ramped up over the years, so has the complexity of the dishes. Today's ornate presentations celebrate art, architecture, chemistry and physics as much as gastronomy. An ambitious million-euro campaign by the 2005 Spanish team showcased the chefs' efforts inside a giant crystal egg inspired by the surrealist Salvador Dali. Food writers from around the globe strain their vocabularies describing the over-the-top creations. The 86-year-old Bocuse insists the contest is ultimately about taste, but winning entries tend to have visual wow factors that probably inspire more awe than hunger.

Mishaps, and even suspected acts of sabotage, have occurred. In 2007, a French dishwasher ate U.S. chef Gavin Kaysen's chicken wings before he could present them to the judges, claiming he thought they had been discarded. The 2011 team from the United Kingdom arrived to find that someone had thrown a party in their kitchen the night before without bothering to clean up.

France enjoys a certain home-team advantage. The host nation has medaled nine times, followed by Norway's eight. Belgium and Sweden are tied at five apiece. Luxembourg has reached the podium once, in 1989, but the tiny country holds the distinction of producing the only female gold medalist, Lea Linster. European teams have long enjoyed benefits other nations have only recently come to view as necessary: deep financial support, and up to a year's worth of paid leave from day jobs to prepare.

Paul Bocuse, with son Jerome in Florida, has said he would like to see an American chef prevail. In 2008, he invited Jerome, Keller and Boulud to reorganize the U.S. effort. Andrew Friedman's lively history, "Knives at Dawn," details the trio's first campaign, in 2009, when then-28-year-old Timothy Hollingsworth, a Keller protege who will soon be leaving his post as chef de cuisine at the French Laundry to consult, represented his country. Despite a late start and a lack of competitive experience, the amiable Californian finished a respectable sixth. The 2011 Team USA, headed by chef James Kent of Eleven Madison Park in New York, enjoyed more preparation time and deeper financial support, but placed a disappointing 10th.

Chef Rosendale hopes to rewrite this history. "The U.S. likes winners," he observes. "Nobody cares who wins 12th place in anything, or even fifth. People in our country aren't going to care about the Bocuse d'Or until we win."

When Rosendale describes his preparation, you get the feeling you're listening to someone who might be working for NASA if he hadn't gone into the culinary arts. Blessed with an engineer's eye for precision, he's determined to leave nothing to chance. He has studied the differences between the electrical systems in France and the United States to make sure his appliances behave the same way in both countries. He has researched the dimensions of the truck that will transport his equipment in Lyon to make sure it all fits. He has a recording of the Bocuse d'Or crowd noise that he plays when he practices, so he can acclimate to the chaos. He has traveled to Europe to meet with previous medalists, and he has studied their winning entries.

Given this passion for detail, it's perhaps surprising that Rosendale doesn't live up to the temperamental-chef stereotype. He's warm and engaging, a people person who clearly enjoys his job overseeing the Greenbrier's nine restaurants, 200-plus kitchen staff and apprenticeship program, as well as his family time with wife Laura, a nurse, and their young sons, Laurence and Liam.

Like television's MacGyver, Rosendale sometimes solves his culinary problems with everyday objects that happen to be around. Intrigued by the shape of Laurence's Mr. Potato Head, he sliced the toy in half and used it as a mold for the complex, multilayered chicken dish that won the Bocuse d'Or USA final in January.

Now a man who doesn't like leaving things to chance, Rosendale began life in Uniontown, Pa., a victim of it. His father left the family when Rich was 5, and his mother, Sharon, a high school English teacher, raised Rich and his younger sister, Kristen, alone. That same year, their house burned down on Christmas Day. Friends set them up in an apartment, donated clothes and loaned them a car. "My mother deserves a lot of credit," he says. "She's an amazing person. All my life I've been motivated by her example."

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Rosendale attributes an early interest in food to his two grandmothers, one Italian and one German. "They were both great cooks. I realized at a young age that I really liked to eat. I discovered cooking when I took Mrs. Kilgore's home economics class at Uniontown Area High School. I made a cake that looked like a pool table. I elevated it on legs and used all these different food colorings. I guess you could call it my first competition piece."

In an age when many aspiring young chefs head to the Culinary Institute of America, Rosendale enrolled in the culinary program at Westmoreland County Community College in Youngwood, Pa. He earned his associate degree and entered the Greenbrier's apprenticeship program, the one he now oversees. This led to apprenticeships with several certified master chefs, training in Europe and sous-vide training at the French Laundry. He returned to the Greenbrier to serve as chef de cuisine in the Tavern Room, and at 31, left to open his own restaurant, Rosendale's, in Columbus, Ohio.

He was in his third year there when the Greenbrier invited him to return as executive chef. It was 2009, and Justice, a West Virginia billionaire, had rescued the 6,000-plus-acre, 710-room, 1,800-employee, four-golf-course resort from bankruptcy, purchasing it from CSX Corp. for \$20 million. Justice had ambitious plans to upgrade with an \$80 million casino and new restaurants.

"The first week, I flew to California and stayed with Jerry and Karen West, and we went around and studied steakhouses so we could open a signature restaurant for them at the hotel," Rosendale recounted. The result, called Prime 44 West for the jersey number of the West Virginia native and longtime L.A. Laker player and general manager, was the first of three new eateries Rosendale would open in his first year.

The next year, while he was overseeing the resort's food service, traveling nationally and internationally to recruit staff, and planting a new 40-acre produce farm for the hotel, he passed the rigorous eight-day examination necessary to become a certified master chef, a designation held by fewer than 100 people nationwide.

Rosendale insists he doesn't have time for hobbies, but his long-standing interest in culinary competitions would probably fall into that category. In 2004, he was the youngest member of the ACF Culinary Olympic Team USA competing against 31 countries in Erfurt, Germany. In 2008, he captained the same team, which brought home three gold medals. The same year, he was a finalist in the Bocuse d'Or USA. He didn't win, but Friedman noted in "Knives at Dawn" that the young chef had "exponentially more competition experience than the rest of the field combined."

It's Sunday morning at the Rosendale house, perched in the West Virginia hills a few miles north of Lewisburg, which was named 2011's "Coolest Small Town in America" by Frommer's Budget Travel magazine. Rich is standing at the stove in shorts, a Reebok T-shirt and bare feet, fixing a late breakfast for Laura and 4-year-old Laurence, while 5-month-old Liam eyes the proceedings. And what sort of tempting fare does a certified master chef, someone invited to cook with Thomas Keller and Emeril Lagasse, a man who has demonstrated his kitchen prowess on the "Today" show, prepare for his own family? "Scrambled eggs, bacon and toast," he reveals.

Hmm. Well, he must be adding something to the eggs. "Salt and pepper," he says. "But the eggs are fresh. I get them from a local farmer."

The Rosendale kitchen looks pretty much like most other kitchens, and the comfort food the family makes in it isn't likely to appear on anyone's platter at the Bocuse d'Or. "Laurence is my toughest critic," Rich notes as he watches his son inspect his eggs. A Nespresso coffee maker is their only concession to haute cuisine, but Laura makes her own coffee in another pot because she doesn't like the intense brews her husband favors.

The two have been an item since junior high school. "I know it sounds strange," Laura says, "but we went to the movies in seventh grade, and a little voice whispered that this was the guy I was going to marry."

"I was kind of wild in those days," Rich acknowledges. "But at least I got it out of my system when I was young. Laura kept me grounded. She still does."

In the food service industry, where relationships are often eroded by long working hours, the Rosendales' stability is atypical. They attribute it to following very different career paths and, more recently, the joys of parenthood. Laura is a full-time nurse practitioner who formerly worked in operating rooms and now does patient follow-up from home for a medical company.

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A contingent of family members, fans and supporters plans to trek to Lyon for the competition, but Laura Rosendale won't be trekking with them. "I don't want to have to take Liam to France, and I don't want to have to leave him behind, either," she says. The competition will be streamed live on the Internet, so she plans to watch from home.

On June 29, an epic windstorm hit the Mid-Atlantic, leaving homes and businesses without electricity in a record heat wave, and introducing the word "derecho" to a lot of people. The Greenbrier was plunged into darkness two days before the Greenbrier Classic, a televised PGA Tour event that attracts 200,000 spectators over four days. Emergency generators came on in the bunker.

Rosendale had just fallen asleep in his own pitch-black, sauna-like home when a phone call informed him that the electricity could be off for days. He drove to the hotel in the middle of the night, dodging fallen trees and power lines, and assembled his troops in the War Room. They made coffee, charged their cellphones and mapped a strategy to preserve the hotel's vast food supply and feed their guests without power.

He backed the large Greenbrier Farm truck up to the loading dock. "I don't even have a license to drive it," he confesses. "It was totally dark and I couldn't see a thing. People were yelling, 'More to the left, more to the right.'"

Like ants marching, the staff carried food to the refrigerated truck for safekeeping. Fortunately the power was restored the next day, and workers performed a reverse maneuver. "It was a real test of our teamwork," Rosendale sums up the all-nighter. "We'll be talking about the 2012 Greenbrier Classic for years to come."

The chef's ability to improvise could serve him well in the Bocuse d'Or. In June, the competition announced major changes few were expecting. The meat the contestants will prepare — Irish beef — was announced, but the seafood, which turned out to be turbot and European blue lobster, wasn't revealed until late November. Two of the three accompanying side dishes for the fish must come from "mystery baskets" of ingredients the teams will receive the night before the contest, and the third side dish should be representative of the contestant's home country.

"I like to control every aspect of what I'm doing in the kitchen," he says. "But you can't prepare when you don't know what you're making, or what your ingredients are. They're testing our ability to cook spontaneously."

Five and a half hours may seem like plenty of time to cook anything, but the complexity of the dishes and garnishes, which can incorporate 50 or more recipes, and timing the process so a platter comes together at exactly the right moment, are what make the Bocuse d'Or the Mount Everest of cooking challenges.

"You have very short windows of opportunity," Rosendale says. "Things can't be ready 10 minutes early or 10 minutes late. And the recipes are wildly complicated."

"We'll use classical techniques, but we'll also use some modern ones like sous-vide and cooking with ash. We'll use familiar equipment, but we'll also use a few appliances you'll never see in a home, like a machine called the Anti-Griddle that can freeze sauces and purees instantly."

Rosendale acknowledges that the food produced at the Bocuse d'Or isn't practical. "You're never going to serve these dishes to 300 people in a restaurant. The point of this competition is to do something that's never been done before. When you consider how long cooking has been around, that's pretty hard to do."

As part of the training, top chefs were invited to coach Rosendale. Grant Achatz, who invented the Anti-Griddle and whose Chicago restaurant, Alinea, has been called the best in America, says: "Rich doesn't need coaching. He's a creative person, an artist, a great chef. He has an immense amount of experience in competitive situations. In his case, what a coach can provide is inspiration and support."

In addition to taking home a gold, Oscar-like statuette of Paul Bocuse looking regal in his chef's whites and toque, the Bocuse d'Or winner pockets a cash prize of \$26,000. Rosendale says he hasn't given much thought to the prize money. His motivation is the challenge. "In the Bocuse d'Or, you're representing more than yourself. You're representing your country. We have a lot of culinary talent in the U.S. This competition has been around for 25 years. It's time for us to win."

Greg Johnson is a writer in Lewisburg, W.Va.

