



Split personality: Michael Voltaggio as gadget nerd (LEFT, with hand smoker) and home cook.

The Double Life of Bravo's New Top Chef

Villain or hero? Science geek or artist? *Top Chef* Season 6 winner Michael Voltaggio may be complicated, but the recipes he shares with F&W are delightfully simple.

by christine quinlan photographs by peden + munk

iF EVERY REALITY SHOW NEEDS A VILLAIN, THEN Michael Voltaggio picked up a second title on Season 6 of Bravo's *Top Chef*. The 31-year-old winner earned a reputation for being arrogant with comments like "Kevin's food is what I cook on my day off," his now-infamous knock against finalist Kevin Gillespie. It didn't help that viewers learned so little about his personal life (he has two little daughters, ages five and 10) and that he never asked for sympathy (he woke up with a 103.5° fever the morning of the Bocuse d'Or elimination challenge but refused to go to the hospital, signing a medical waiver—and ultimately lost to Kevin).

All of which left us at F&W wondering: Could an intense and somewhat intimidating chef like Michael Voltaggio—a technical master with a penchant for futuristic ingredients, like liquid nitrogen and agar—create simple recipes for the home cook? Would he even agree to?

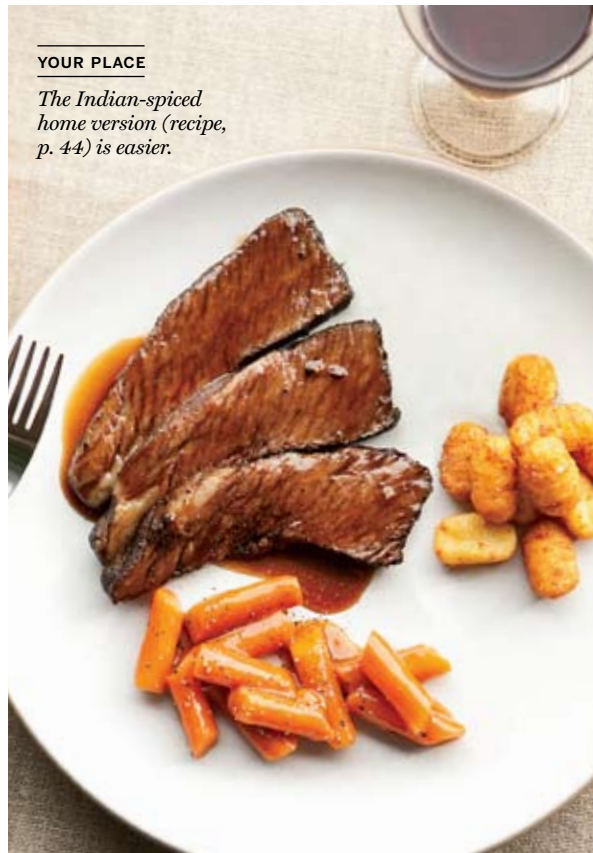
Little about his impressive bio suggests he'd be open to the suggestion. Voltaggio, who grew up in Maryland with his brother Bryan (also a finalist on the show), completed the Greenbrier Hotel's Culinary Apprenticeship Program at 21—one of its youngest graduates ever. He trained under exalted chefs José Andrés and Charlie Palmer. Now chef de cuisine at the Dining Room at the Langham Huntington Hotel in Pasadena, he's created a menu with such avant-garde ironies as "flavors of pot roast"—Australian wagyu short rib cooked sous vide for 48 hours, then served with gnocchi he flavors with a device called a Smoking Gun that shoots cool smoke directly into foods.

Yet Michael was game to take the F&W challenge, and he submitted an eminently doable but still super-creative version of those short ribs. He flavors the meat with the Indian spice rub garam masala, braising them in the oven for two hours until tender—no sous vide necessary.



HIS PLACE

At his restaurant, Voltaggio turns short ribs into art.



YOUR PLACE

The Indian-spiced home version (recipe, p. 44) is easier.

He pairs the ribs with gnocchi that he fries until crispy, a kind of haute Tater Tot. Completing the dish: carrots cooked in carrot juice and a hoppy beer to emphasize their savory depth, not their sweetness (recipes begin on p. 44). Says Michael, “This is who I am, without all the bells and whistles. I’d even make this at home.”

Not that he’s home much. When he’s not cooking at the Langham, he’s riding his motorcycle or checking out new restaurants with his kids; he’s excited that his older daughter is “starting to respect food.” As for his love life, he may be the first contestant in the history of reality TV who won’t discuss it.

Professionally, he’s showing a slightly less serious side. He is collaborating on the website voltaggiobrothers.com with Bryan, filming cooking videos that show how to make brioche in the microwave, for instance, or that debunk the myth that consuming Pop Rocks and soda at the same time makes your head explode. The Voltaggios are also working on a cookbook together.

When asked whether he plans to open his own restaurant with his \$125,000 *Top Chef* prize, Michael says, “I’m not going to be irresponsible. But if things come up, like if I have the idea ‘Oh, I want to buy one of those food trucks,’ there could be a spur-of-the-moment purchase.” He takes the long view of his career and admires the way that superstar chefs like Thomas Keller and Alain

Ducasse have built their empires slowly, carefully training staff in their style and philosophies.

Food truck or not, Voltaggio can’t imagine not working in a professional kitchen. “Cooking is the only thing I know how to do,” he explains. But he knows he still has a lot to learn, and not just about cooking. When he worked for Charlie Palmer, the restaurant’s ice maker broke and Palmer grabbed a screwdriver. Ten minutes later, the machine was fixed. “At that moment, you’re like, ‘That’s why he makes millions a year, or whatever it is,’” Voltaggio says. That doesn’t sound so arrogant.

POP QUIZ

1 The Zinfandel grape is the same grape as:

A Crljenak **B** Primitivo **C** Both A and B

2 Which red wine could compete in *Top Chef*’s “Pigs and Pinot”?

A Amarone **B** Rioja **C** Burgundy

3 *Top Chef*’s finale was in Napa Valley. What is its famed grape?

A Cabernet Sauvignon **C** Cabernet Franc
B Sauvignon Blanc

ANSWERS 1 C; 2 C; 3 A

Indian-Spiced Short Ribs

ACTIVE: 45 MIN; TOTAL: 3 HR 15 MIN

4 SERVINGS

- ¼ cup coriander seeds
- 2 tablespoons cumin seeds
- 1 tablespoon black peppercorns
- 1 tablespoon ground ginger
- 1 tablespoon ground cardamom
- 1 tablespoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon ground cloves
- ½ teaspoon crushed red pepper
- 3 bay leaves, crumbled
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 4 boneless short ribs (10 to 12 ounces each), trimmed of fat

Salt

- 1 large onion, thinly sliced
- 2 carrots, chopped
- 1 celery rib, chopped
- 3 plum tomatoes, coarsely chopped
- 2 heads of garlic, halved crosswise
- 2 cups dry red wine
- 1 quart chicken stock or broth

1. Preheat the oven to 325°. In a small skillet, toast the coriander and cumin seeds over moderately high heat, shaking the pan constantly, until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Transfer the seeds to a spice grinder and let cool. Add the peppercorns, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, crushed red pepper and bay leaves and pulse the garam masala to a powder.
2. In a large enameled cast-iron casserole, heat the oil. Season the short ribs with salt and sear them over high heat until browned and crusty all over, about 15 minutes. Transfer the meat to a plate.
3. Add the onion, carrots and celery to the casserole and cook over moderate heat until lightly browned, about 7 minutes. Add the tomatoes, garlic and 3 tablespoons of the garam masala (there will be extra) and cook until fragrant and the tomatoes are beginning to break down, about 3 minutes. Add the wine and boil until reduced by half, scraping up any browned bits stuck to the

casserole, about 5 minutes. Add the stock and bring to a simmer. Return the meat to the casserole and season with salt. Cover and braise in the oven for about 2 hours, until just tender but not falling apart.

4. Transfer the meat to a baking sheet. Strain the liquid into a saucepan. Skim off and discard the fat that rises to the surface. Boil over high heat until the sauce is reduced to 1 cup, about 15 minutes.

5. Preheat the broiler and position a rack 8 inches from the heat. Brush the meat with some of the sauce and broil for 3 minutes per side, until browned and sizzling. Sprinkle the meat lightly with garam masala, then slice it ½ inch thick. Transfer to plates and serve with the remaining sauce.

MAKE AHEAD The recipe can be prepared ahead through Step 4; refrigerate the meat and sauce separately for up to 3 days.

WINE Try a full-bodied, peppery Zinfandel from California, like the raspberry-rich 2006 Amapola Creek Monte Rosso Vineyard.

Carrots Braised in Beer and Carrot Juice

 TOTAL: 30 MIN
4 SERVINGS

- 8 medium carrots
- 1 cup fresh carrot juice
- ½ cup hoppy beer, such as a pilsner
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter

Salt

1. Peel the carrots so that the thick ends are roughly the same width as the thinner ends; cut each carrot in thirds crosswise. Put the carrots in a medium skillet with the carrot juice and beer and bring to a boil. Cover and simmer over moderate heat until the liquid is reduced by half, about 10 minutes. Add the sugar, cover and cook until tender, about 10 minutes. Transfer the carrots to a plate.
2. Whisk the butter into the sauce and simmer until thickened, 1 minute. Return the carrots to the skillet, season with salt and toss to coat. Transfer to plates and serve.

Crisp Gnocchi “Tater Tots”

ACTIVE: 1 HR; TOTAL: 2 HR 40 MIN

4 SERVINGS

- 3 large baking potatoes (about 2 pounds), scrubbed
- ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 6 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- ½ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (2 ounces)

Kosher salt

- 1 large egg, beaten
- Canola oil, for frying**
- Ketchup, for serving**
1. Put the potatoes in a large saucepan and cover with 4 inches of cold water. Bring to a boil and simmer over moderately low heat until tender, about 40 minutes. Drain and let cool slightly. Cut the potatoes into large chunks and press them through a ricer into a large bowl. Discard the skins. Let the potatoes cool completely, about 1 hour.
 2. Stir the cornstarch, flour, cheese and 2 teaspoons of salt into the potatoes. Add

the egg and knead gently until a soft dough forms. Wrap the dough in plastic and let stand at room temperature for 15 minutes.

3. Bring a very large pot of water to a boil and fill a large bowl with ice water. Divide the dough into 4 pieces and roll each piece into a 16-inch rope, about 1 inch thick. Cut each rope into 16 pieces. Add one-fourth of the gnocchi to the boiling water and cook, stirring once or twice, until they rise to the surface and then float for 20 seconds. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the gnocchi to the ice water to cool, then spread the gnocchi on a paper towel-lined platter and turn until dry. Repeat with the remaining gnocchi.
4. In a large saucepan, heat 2 inches of oil to 375°. Carefully add one-fourth of the gnocchi to the hot oil and cook, stirring gently once or twice, until golden and crisp, 4 to 5 minutes. Transfer the “Tater Tots” to a paper towel-lined plate and sprinkle with salt. Repeat to make the remaining “Tater Tots.” Serve with ketchup. ●