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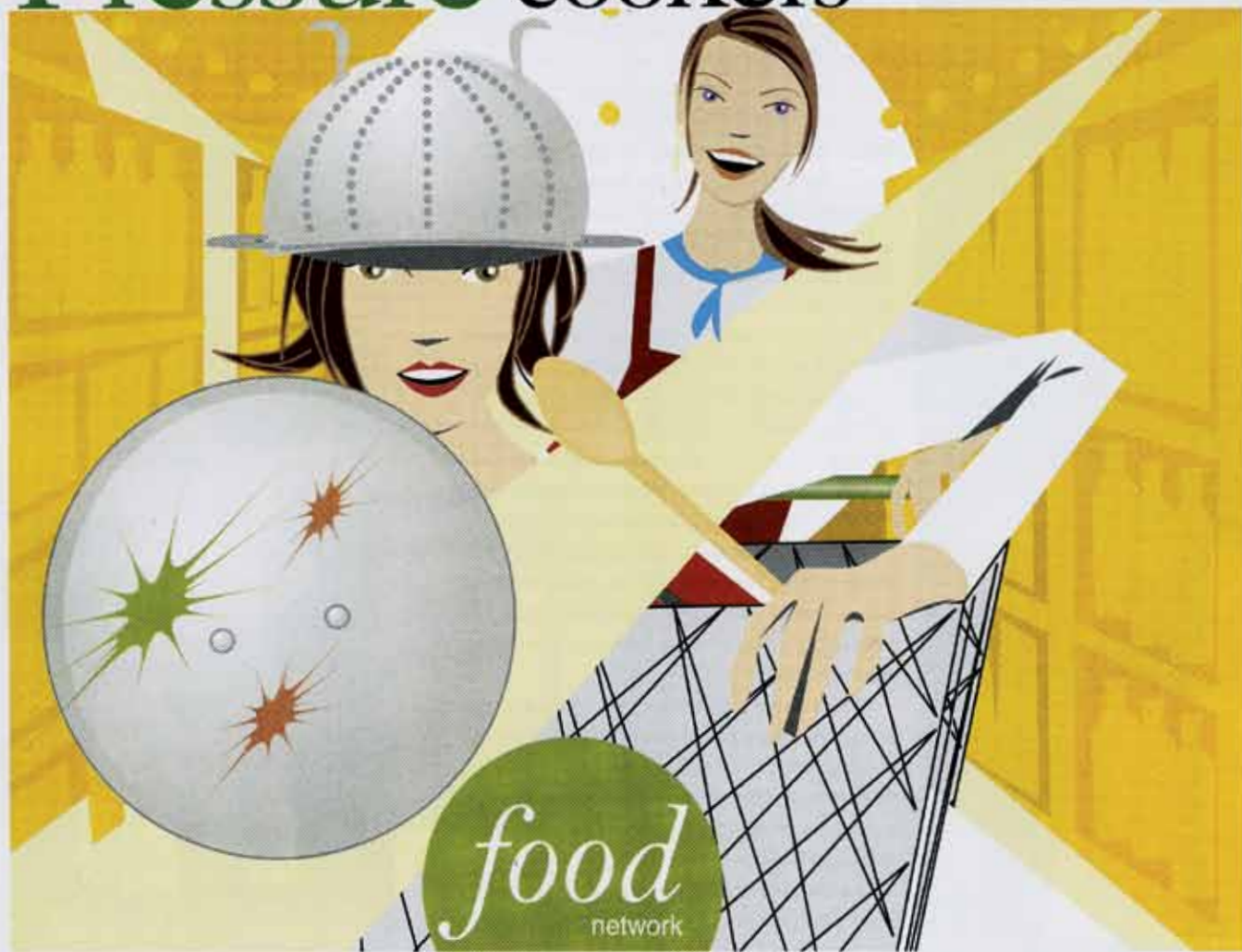
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When a local team competes in the Food Network's newest TV competition, the food—and the knives—start flying.

BY DARA BUNJON

IT ALL STARTED LAST DECEMBER WITH SLOANE BROWN'S weekly "Table Talk" column in *The Sun* that said the Food Network was looking for local talent for a new team-competition show called "Food Fight." As a devotee of TV chefs like Julia Child, Sara Moulton, Emeril and Justin Williams, I saw my 15 minutes of culinary fame on the horizon.

Food Network, the column said, was seeking "unusual" teams—ones with lots of personality, a good story and the ability to make downright great TV. I kept the column on my desk for three weeks, then called my good friend Nona Nielsen-Parker, co-owner and executive chef at Mount Washington's Glas-z Café and Glas-z Gourmet Catering and read it to her. "Well, do you want to do this, Nona?" I asked. "I'll write the e-mail and give them the *amuse bouche* of our illustrious careers." Nona

agreed and I pondered, jotted, edited, interjected and finally sent the e-mail.

The next day Scott Michnick, an associate producer with "Food Fight," wrote back: "Dara, your bios are awesome, you guys are more than qualified and I look forward to meeting with you... Scott." After doing the happy-dance for five minutes, I forwarded the e-mail to Nona.

When Scott called to set up our audition, he recommended that we do something over-the-top. We decided to capitalize on the fact that we travel anywhere for food—from Paris to Philadelphia, Chicago to New York, there isn't a restaurant too small or too large where we haven't dined. Nona and I each decided to create a tote bag filled with restaurant memorabilia for the audition and not to tell each other what was in

them, so as to keep our reactions natural. On the day of the audition, I put my hair in rollers, topped by a kerchief in true Baltimore "hon" fashion, grabbed my tote covered with restaurant logos and went off to the café. Patrons tried not to stare, but it must have been hard. Nona had decorated a 1950s suitcase with menus and adorned herself in an apron of the same vintage. A martini glass dangling off her ear and her cheese grater necklace were the *coup de maitre*. Every time we glanced at each other we broke out laughing.

Scott arrived with video camera in hand. Lights, camera, action and Scott uttered, "OK, we're here at Glas-z Café with—" and I said, "Dara and Nona, the Mutt and Jeff of Food." Nona is tall and of Nordic heritage, and I am vertically challenged, just making 5 feet.

Nona went to her suitcase and said, "So sorry you couldn't make it to Jean George" and handed me a fancy carryout container. She pulled out a martini glass and waxed poetic on the Aquapolitans from Aquavit, then gave me a gift from Fauchon in Paris. From my tote, I pulled out a lamb chop bone and kissed it, saying, "Aaaah, that rack of lamb from Daniel's, superb!" At one point I think I did a little tap dance.

Scott said, "That's a wrap," but no, it couldn't be—I had one more humiliating stunt to pull. "Pleeeez turn the camera back on," I implored. And he did. I dove into my tote, pulled out a not-very-ripe tomato and vigorously bit into it like the host of "Iron Chef" does with a sweet pepper. "We take the challenge!" I roared. Scott couldn't stop laughing—a very good sign.

Afterward, as we fed Scott a selection of Nona's creations from the café, he reviewed how "Food Fight" would arrive at its final contestants. The show had a large turnout of wannabes, about 38 teams. Each tape would go to the production company, where producers would narrow the field and then forward the finalists onto Food Network. The producers there would make the ultimate decision. When Scott asked us for a team name, I immediately offered several: "The Umamis," "Big Falafel and Little Pho" and "Velveeta and Louise." He said they were probably a bit over the heads of the audience. Thankfully, we had time to brainstorm other names.

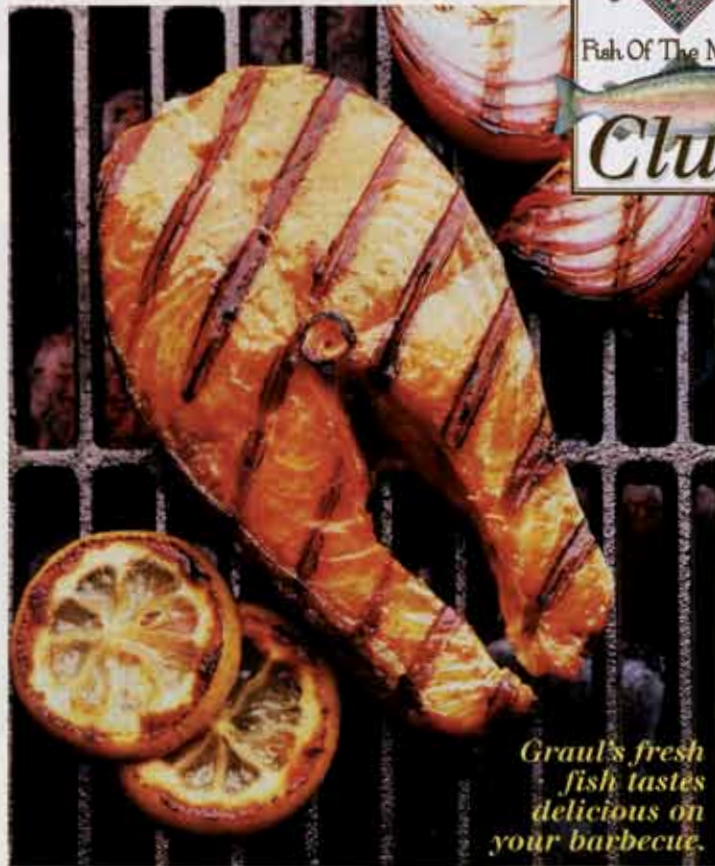
Scott called a couple of weeks later to inform us that we had garnered one of the four coveted spots for the Baltimore taping, and guess what?—Food Network had

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named our team "Friends." (And these people get paid the big bucks?)

Prior to the taping, Kris Larsen, the show's producer, gave us the scoop on how the show worked: On the day of the competition, we'd be presented with a "mystery" regional main ingredient, a limited larder of nine staples (water, chicken stock, butter, oil, pepper, salt, sugar, milk and flour), a stove with four burners—no oven—a stainless steel prep table and \$20 for supplies. We had a two-hour time lim-

it in which to go shopping at Whole Foods down near the harbor, cook the meal and complete three identical finished plates for the judges.

Before the big day, a TV crew filmed our friends and family at my house touting our talents for a background segment for the show. Nona's husband was asked, "Do you think they will win 'Food Fight'?" He answered, "I've been with her many years and there are few fights she ever loses." Her sister said, "There is Julia, Martha, Nona and



Dara Bunjon and Nona Nielsen-Parker go all out during their audition.

The “Family” team asked where to enter Whole Foods market and I kindly started to inform them, before Nona kicked me. Gosh, I didn’t realize how competitive she was.

lanes for the teams—we got the one with the clerk who needed to look up every product code. Finally, we were out the door and on the way back to the restaurant. Uh-oh, forgot the mustard and onions!

Back at Red Tapas, we began by breaking down the three ducks. While I calmly dissected mine, Nona ripped into one with such fervor that a duck bone punctured her skin. The citrus mayonnaise without the

mustard became a sauce, I strained the tea but dumped the infusion, and Nona was bleeding consistently throughout the competition. The grill pan wasn’t hot enough, the oil took too long to come to temperature and of course, all was captured on camera for posterity. The Family Team threw a carrot on the floor and said “don’t cross that line.” If I could have used it in our dish, I would have picked it up. When JD asked the name of our dish, I said, “You are in Baltimore, hon, and being on the show is fun, so it’s ‘Hon Fun Duck.’” The two hours disappeared, Nona finally stopped bleeding and we plated the food.

The Family Team prepared blackened duck breast with salsa on a boxed rice mix, and sautéed carrots and string beans with a kale garnish. How could anyone with food

knowledge even consider blackened seasoned duck—it’s a sacrilege! And the kale garnish was just so “diner.” We had created a lemongrass tea-infused rare duck breast with five-spice powder, mini egg rolls containing spinach, mango, sautéed garlic and duck; sautéed spinach and couscous with dried fruit and nuts on a small pool of citrus sauce with a chopped chive finish.

We passed our plated dishes to the nameless, anonymous judges, then began cleaning up.

So who won? The producers tell me I’m not allowed to say. You’ll have to find out for yourself when our episode of “Food Fight” airs on Food Network this fall. As they say, may the best duck win. □

Dara Bunjon is a sales representative for Vanus Spices and has a public relations firm, “Buzz...”

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