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Bocuse d'Or USA: Reasons to Believe

Why This Time Might be Different (no, really) for the Stars and Stripes in Lyon



Dream Team? Coach Gavin Kaysen (left) and 2013 Bocuse d'Or USA candidate Richard Rosendale (right)

January 29—The Bocuse d'Or USA created something of a monster for itself in 2008, when Thomas Keller and Daniel Boulud, in partnership with Jerome Bocuse, took over the leadership of the organization. With their culinary savvy, fundraising ability, and deep bench of human resources, most people figured the mere involvement of the two most respected fine-dining moguls in the United States would be all it took to field a winning team and reverse two decades of US disappointment in the world's preeminent culinary competition.

But most people are casual observers. They don't know the first thing about the Bocuse d'Or; don't realize just how exacting the standards are over there, in Lyon, France, where the global competition is held; don't appreciate how hard the other teams train or how most of the judges' palates tilt toward Europe.

Even Keller and Boulud didn't fully understand the dragon they were attempting to slay their first time out, not having ever attended the event themselves; they learned the hard way that it's a big dragon, as tall as the Eiffel Tower, and that it breathes fire hot enough to melt the hopes and dreams of 21 (out of 24) teams every year. All of which created a delicate scenario when the organization's pr team whipped up a frenzy of great expectations heading into the 2009 competition.

And so, when The French Laundry's Timothy Hollingsworth placed 6th out of 24 teams in Lyon that year, journalists and foodies recoiled, spewing snark and sarcasm. Then, in 2011, when Eleven Madison Park's James Kent finished 10th, the wheels really came off—all the old complaints came flooding back: "Why can't we win this thing?" "Why do we bother trying?" "What's wrong?!" The moment seemed to have passed the new guard by, as evidenced by the relatively scant media coverage leading up to this weekend's finals. When I emailed a recent Bocuse d'Or USA finalist late Saturday night to ask if I'd see him at Hyde Park Sunday, he wrote back that he didn't even know the event was this weekend.

But life is full of surprises, and today, Sunday, January 29, might just go down as the day that the Bocuse d'Or USA, under its current leadership, finally showed signs of reaching its full potential and having a shot of really, truly, finally—yes, I'm going to say it out loud—landing a candidate on the podium in Lyon.

There are a few reasons I've come to this conclusion. First of all, the organization is clearly learning as it goes and it's made some significant changes this time around: Gavin Kaysen, the former USA candidate, has shifted into full **Herb Brooks** mode. Rather than working in the background as he has for the last two teams, Kaysen will officially assume the mantle of coach; it's right there in his email signature, under where it says Executive Chef, Cafe Boulud. Brooks, the coach of the USA 1980 "Miracle on Ice" Olympic Hockey Team made leg strength and stamina his signature focus; Kaysen's will be *time*: He's going to get the newly selected team training out in Yountville by mid-February, and be sure they're ready for full-on practice sessions by October, neither of which has been the case for the two most recent teams. (See my [interview](#) with Kaysen for more on this. Sunday's Bocuse d'Or USA finals were also a much-improved event for a number of reasons that I'll touch on in a subsequent post of miscellaneous observations and interviews on Monday, by which time I hope to have a release and photos from the Bocuse d'Or USA as well.)

More importantly, the Bocuse d'Or USA has found themselves a candidate who both wants this badly and, as a former culinary Olympian, has the competition chops to hit the ground running, without needing to be schooled in the fine points of competition, platter presentation, and so on. **Richard Rosendale**, Executive Chef of The Greenbrier, who took silver at this event in Orlando in 2008, won the gold today (along with his *commis* Corey Siegel) earning the right to compete for the US next year, and it was a spectacular display: He was preternaturally calm during the competition, and his kitchen was astonishingly clean throughout. His food was stunning and, based on the morsel I was lucky enough to taste after plating (shhhh, don't tell), delicious. (Kaysen emailed me tonight that full scoring sheets will be posted on the organization's website; will be interesting to see how close the other teams came.)

I vividly remember standing with Rosendale after the competition (but before the results were known) in 2008 as he shook his head, hoping that the organizers and judges understood that the Bocuse d'Or wasn't a restaurant competition. I quoted Rosendale's comments at length in my book *Knives at Dawn*: "It is not restaurant food... The Bocuse is the ultimate in French finesse and, if we want to win that, then we need to beat them at their own game, and that is just an unbelievable amount of creativity and visual impact and big flavor profiles."

In 2009 and 2011, the Bocuse d'Or USA selected restaurant chefs, but this time out, there weren't as many in the hunt: only silver medalist Jeffrey Lizotte currently runs a restaurant; the other three candidates came from a hotel (Rosendale), a cooking school (bronze medalist William Bradley), and a country club (Danny Cerqueda). These are the venues from which competition chefs traditionally hail in the US, and we'll now see if that background, combined with the resources and hard-earned wisdom of the new guard produces the desired result.

The candidate sure thinks it'll work: I caught up with Rosendale moments after he won today. Here's what he had to say: "You know I've been wanting to do this for a long, long time and to finally have the opportunity, I'm going to home in on it as a goal like crazy. What we did in here, we did the best we could do under these conditions, meaning the timing and the [training] kitchen [at the Greenbrier]. But to know we're going to be in Lyon and to get a duplicate [Bocuse d'Or competition] kitchen at The Greenbrier, I know we can bring it on and take it to another level from what we did here. This is only the first phase. We're excited to continue on... We want to get on the podium. We don't want to just go to Lyon to say we went to Lyon. We want to get on the podium. We want to get the gold."

So, to all those who checked out on the Bocuse d'Or over the past few years: it might be time to tune back in, because that fairy tale story, the one that so many have left for dead, may yet be alive and well. In fact, chapter one might have been written today.



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