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*High-res images, show footage, and interviews available upon request.

FOOD NETWORK STAR

Season 8 – Finalist Bios

TEAM ALTON

Judson Allen, 30 (Chicago), studied food science and began as a self-taught cook, eventually becoming a culinary-trained chef. He struggled with his weight for years, but recently changed his life and eating habits and lost more than 100 pounds. He owns his own catering business, focused on healthy food and nutritional counseling. He's been called an "architect of flavor," and uses the Creole-inspired culinary style he learned from his grandfather to build out-of-the-box dishes with lots of spice - all while fusing together global inspiration and flavors.

Martie Duncan, slightly over 40 (Birmingham, Ala.), learned to cook from watching her mother in the kitchen and developed a love for entertaining at an early age. She has traveled the world and her adventurous "life of the party" spirit has given her a unique life perspective. Martie's varied career includes stints as a police officer, wedding expert and web content developer. She currently fuses her interests in food and entertaining as a virtual party planner, with her own web site and blog.

Emily Ellyn, 29 (Orlando, Fla.), a trained chef, studied at the Culinary Institute of America and Academie Internationale de Management in Paris. Growing up on a farm in Ohio, Emily was exposed to the food world as a child and developed her skills after her parents encouraged her to travel the world. Emily has worked in various restaurants positions and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in hospitality management. Relying on her experience and academic chops, Emily loves using fresh, local and culturally intriguing ingredients.

Cristie Schoen, 35 (New Orleans), grew up in a military family in Biloxi, MS, cooking Cajun cuisine with her dad and family from New Orleans. Cristie attended Louisiana State University and studied abroad in Germany, where she discovered an appreciation for European food and cooking techniques. She later moved to Los Angeles, and unexpectedly found success in the movie catering business, where she created and prepared food for a variety of different tastes. Cristie aspires to own an Aquaponics farm and a farm-to-table cafe, serving locally grown, nutritious and delicious cuisine.

Justin Warner, 27 (Brooklyn, N.Y.), a self-taught cook, is owner/chef of a hip Brooklyn restaurant that he built from the ground up. Justin relies on his instincts and personal experience to put a unique spin on every dish he serves. He began working in restaurants at just thirteen years old, and has knowledge of the industry that extends way beyond his years. His approach to food reflects his personality – edgy, intense, passionate and witty.

TEAM BOBBY

Eric Lee, 44 (Petaluma, Calif.), graduated with high honors from the Culinary Institute of America, and his kitchen skills, along with his calm confidence, have made him an acclaimed chef in the California wine country. Before going to culinary school, Eric graduated with a degree in sociology from the University of California Los Angeles. He has served as the executive chef for a Sonoma County winery for the past eleven years, where he is well-known for his mastery of food and wine pairing. Eric distinguishes his food by deconstructing and recreating dishes using alternate ingredients and cooking methods.

Nikki Martin, 31 (West Hollywood, Calif.), was exposed to the culinary world as a youngster through her mother's former career as an executive at a nationwide food distributor. She grew up to become an adventurous world traveler, learning about international cuisines and furthering her passion for all things edible. Nikki is currently a food and beverage consultant and private chef, where she takes a farm-to-table approach and prepares bold, globally-inspired dishes with seasonal ingredients

Malcolm Mitchell, 41 (Washington, D.C.), received a degree in Culinary Arts after spending four years in the Navy. Malcolm began cooking alongside his mother and credits her for teaching him how to cook great meals on a budget. After his time in the military, he realized that he could turn his passion for cooking and entertaining into a career – and he is now a personal chef and caterer for sports teams, politicians and entertainers. He describes himself as “a classically trained chef with an urban touch.”

Michele Ragussis, 42 (Brooklyn, N.Y.), grew up in an Italian/Greek family where food was, and still is, a big part of their lives. She fell in love with the New England lifestyle and cuisine when she moved to Rhode Island to attend college. After deciding that hands-on restaurant experience was more valuable to her than attending classes, Michele went on to spend fifteen years in executive chef positions. Her distinctive tattoos and piercings may look intimidating, but Michele’s personality is warm, relaxed and fun.

Kara Sigle, 31 (Chicago), has an eclectic culinary style and strong interest in health and fitness. A family-oriented Midwesterner, Kara attended culinary school, but spent time in various other industries before deciding to pursue food as her career. Her fresh take on nostalgic recipes make for delicious, healthy and accessible dishes that the whole family will enjoy. This avid exercise guru is constantly on the go, running her own catering company and teaching fitness classes – she also hopes to open her own café in Chicago.

TEAM GIADA

Philip “Ippy” Aiona, 23 (Kamuela, HI), grew up in his father’s Hawaiian plate lunch restaurant and is now executive chef at his mother’s Italian restaurant. He also runs a food boutique and espresso bar. His mother is originally from New York and his dad a native Hawaiian, so Ippy was exposed to different types of cuisine from an early age. He attended Le Cordon Bleu in San Francisco, where he refined his culinary techniques. This laid-back chef injects Pacific ingredients into traditional European cuisine, highlighting his background with a personal twist.

Martita Jara, 35 (San Diego), began working in her family’s restaurant business at a young age, and her mom’s authentic Mexican home cooking inspired her culinary passion. Her parents moved to the U.S. two years before she was born, and Martita credits them with her work ethic and perseverance. She attended a few semesters at culinary school, but most of her skills are self-taught. A vivacious newlywed who loves to entertain, Martita cooks with loads of Latin flavor and lots of love.

Yvan Lemoine, 30 (Maspeth, N.Y.), was born and raised in Venezuela and moved to New York when he was thirteen. He cooked frequently for himself and his brothers, and developed an interest for cooking when he started a culinary arts internship through a program at his high school. He has worked at elite New York restaurants with well-known chefs, including Jacques Torres and Rocco DiSpirito. Yvan now cooks for the French Consulate and bartends at a New York hot spot where he creates out-of-the-box cocktails.

Josh Lyons, 42 (Jupiter, Fla.), has an affinity for food, music and entertaining. After spending years in a rock band and working in restaurants, Josh decided to go to culinary school and loved every minute of it. He is an experienced sushi chef and restaurant consultant, with an expertise in creating unexpected Asian fusion dishes. This multi-talented chef still writes and performs with his band and also has a passion for photography.

Linkie Marais, 28 (North Attleborough, Mass.), moved from South Africa to Mississippi when she was 16, but her interest in baking and decorating cakes started long before then. She worked for a wedding company during high school where she decorated wedding cakes and catered, and she later graduated college with a degree in culinary arts and worked as a pastry chef and cake artist. She then moved to Boston where she worked for a high-profile baking company, and was part of a team that decorated up to 80 cakes per week. Her recipes and techniques are influenced by the South African cuisine she grew up with.