

East Hell's Kitchen

The studio audience was restless and yammering. The odor of hot cooking grease and freshly cut fruit alternately invaded each personal space, malodorous smidgens that heightened the other senses. If a ticket holder wasn't hungry before he attended a live production of *East Hell's Kitchen*, he certainly was by the time the contestants had finished whipping up their signature entrees.

The producer and one of three judges, Patches DeMayo, an ample figure secure in greybearded middle age, had recently relocated from Quaintsville to East Hell and taken the job as working master chef for Mandrake, the eatery that catered to the celebrity shmutz crowd and various hoi polloi. He was cantankerous to the point of abuse. If he didn't agree with a contestant's use of a seasoning, or style of presentation, or using the wrong preparation protocols, he would force his countenance into an ugly scowl, rip the apron from his elephantine torso, point his finger at the unfortunate cook's head, and bully, berate, and belittle with all the lung power he could muster, the by now quaking and teary-eyed chef wannabe.

When the screaming subsided, he would announce in a soft voice, "No one in their right mind will ever hire you. Leave my kitchen at once."

The totally dissed and weeping loser would then be hustled out a side door, head covered with a dish towel, to a waiting taxi, as a dozen or so paparazzi snapped photo after photo.

This, the fourth season of *East Hell's Kitchen*, was winding down. The final two contestants had survived six weeks of savage mental beatings by Chef DeMayo, who had been outvoted time and time again by the other judges, George Carlin and Pierce Brosnan.

Brosnan nearly always voted yes. He still wore the hat that covered the scar on his skull where brain cells were extracted for the intelligent chimp experiments. After long therapy, he was over the Daniel Craig thing. He felt good about himself.

Carlin didn't really need this gig, but his posthumously published "*Seven Things You Should Never Put in a Recipe*" cookbook was still hot, and his presence on the panel kept the advertising revenue pouring into the CurryCorp network.

The set of *East Hell's Kitchen* was simple: a stove, a refrigerator, a table with cutting board, a

few utensils, and a sink. The stage crew always did the dishes after the show. There was, of course, a studio band, Bad Boy Boogie and the Screaming Doves. They would play at the opening of the show, the introduction of the contestants, and at dramatic moments when the judges tasted the finished entries.

The final two contestants were waiting in a side room for their cue, usually a stage manager who popped in the door, pointed at the next one up, and yelled. This was it. In an hour, the world would celebrate the next celebrity chef, and his books, aprons, apparel line and recipe archive would command vast sums of money and he would be booked for talk and cooking shows for the rest of his natural life.

It had come down to the two chefs left standing, both locals, Fletch Carnoustie, a caterer from North Bergen, and Chef Boioyoy, a kosher soupmaker from East Hell.

“Carnoustie! You’re on!”

Fletch was ready. He felt good about this, his latest recipe. In the culinary universe, it was a constant race to find new and different ways to combine the exotic and the mundane on the same plate. Seasonings came and went like migrating ducks, and the key to success was to find a flavor, any flavor, that no one had ever tasted. One an enterprising young cook could call his own.

He walked into the bright lights of the set, the Screaming Doves played the theme while he acknowledged the boisterous audience.

“Tell me,” intoned Chef DeMayo, voice oozing sarcasm, “just what are you planning to wow us with tonight, Mr. Carnoustie?”

Fletch opened his mouth and belched. The three beers he had in his hotel room were kicking in. The crowd tittered, the drummer pounded his tom tom.

“It’s a new recipe I’ve developed. The main ingredient is fish.”

“Well, man, don’t just stand there like some idiot. Get cooking!”

Fletch thought about punching DeMayo then and there but held off. Better to get this thing won first, then he’d...he’d...

He went to work. Food went from fridge into pans, precooked ingredients were warmed and placed carefully on chafing dishes and various saucers and platters, while cameras watched every

move and, at least for the moment, the band sat silent.

A commercial break came and went, and Fletch took off his apron and signaled to the judges that his dish was ready to sample.

“It’s about time!” DeMayo shouted, pushing Fletch nearer and nearer to a violent reaction. “What sort of garbage is this, anyway?”

Fletch proudly displayed the tabletop, pulled a lighter from his pocket and lit the dish, then picked up the fiery tray and carried it over to the judges table.

“This is my signature recipe, snail darter fin soup with a crunchy shiitake and bacon tapenade drizzled onto a bran muffin and served on a flaming napkin.”

The crowd applauded as television viewers at home watched an ad for Mandrake float across the bottom of their screens.

“All right then, why don’t we have a taste?” DeMayo was actually smiling.

George Carlin whistled, winked at the camera, and gave a thumbs-up.

Pierce Brosnan took the tray that was offered him, blew out the flames, and slurped a spoonful of the soup. A split second later, his eyes rolled back, he stood up, opened his mouth, and tongue lolling, he began to drool. At the same moment, his right foot began to tap out a heel-toe-heel-toe mambo. This kept up for a full minute as the audience clapped in rhythm and the sax player noodled a tune, then he abruptly sat down.

“I’ll try the muffin now.”

Apparently he was ok. He took a bite of the muffin, chewed thoughtfully, then held up his arms and shouted.

“Yes!”

George Carlin was up next. He pulled a straw from his shirt pocket, stuck it in his soup, and sipped. Within three seconds his eyes crossed and he stood and walked on wobbly legs to the center of the stage, where he collapsed, curling into a fetal position, slobbering and muttering to himself.

Chef DeMayo turned to Fletch, who stood with mouth agape, not quite believing what he was witnessing.

“I’m going to try a taste of this so-called soup of yours, and for your sake, let’s hope my

reaction is not the same as Mr. Carlin's."

He slid the remaining tray to the far end of the table, as far away from the other judges as possible, and with great ceremony, selected a shiny silver soup spoon from his boxed collection as the band played an ominous tone. He smiled, a disdainful, haughty, nose-in-the-air grimace, then sniffed the soup, and scooped a fingerful of the topping from the muffin, holding it up for all to see. At that very moment, George Carlin arose from his catatonia and zombie-walked on stiff legs back to the judge's table and sat down.

"I'm ok," he announced to no one in particular. "Go ahead, Chef."

Chef DeMayo nodded, then sneering, took a slurping sip of the soup, then stuffed the fingerful of tapenade in his mouth, smacking his lips, then swallowed with gusto. He threw his beret into the front row, there was a mad scramble for it, unfolded chairs folded. He stared up toward the ceiling and uttered three words, "Klaatu Barada Nikto."

The studio audience responded with silence, broken only by the metallic click of digital cameras, and one nervous cough. Someone's cellphone warbled.

He then repeated the words, emphasis on the first word. "**Klaatu** Barada Nikto."

The crowd started to murmur. "He's nuts!" yelled somebody. Then, as Chef DeMayo removed his shirt, he repeated the words, this time the accent was on the second word. "Klaatu **Barada** Nikto."

The ticketholders were now visibly angry, half of them stood and booed.

"Klaatu Barada **Nikto**." This time the third word was emphasized.

Suddenly a shoe flew out of the now shouting and cursing crowd, narrowly missing the Chef. He continued to stare at the ceiling, oblivious to the to the rising bedlam as a virtual blizzard of shoes arced from the audience toward the stage. Pierce Brosnan was hit in the head by a size 14 Doc Marten, temporarily rendering him unconscious. Fletch reached up and caught a pricey red Ferragamo spike heel and tried it on. It fit. He bippity bopped around the stage wearing one high heel and one Air Nike, flexing his biceps. The chant began. "Fletch...Fletch...Fletch...**Fleeetch!**"

The building began to rumble and shake. Fletch's dish fell to the stage floor. One wall suddenly caved inward, a cloud of dust billowed into the Hell's Kitchen studio. Chef DeMayo lowered his

heavenly gaze as the ten foot tall clanking robot stepped through the hole.

“Klaatu Barada Nikto.” The voice was tinny and sonorous. The machine had one red glass orb glowing in the center of its face. “**Klaatu Barada Nikto,**” it repeated, louder.

People ran screaming for the exits, while one courageous photojournalist, Marston Tidwell of the Bergen Bugle, stood his ground and filmed the calamity, his live feed to the Food Channel still hot. Chef Boioyoy was trampled by the stampeding crowd. He lay on the floor near the exit, feebly crawling in circles. His showcase meal, a cranberry quiche with a jalapeno and soy brulee, was left by the stage door, untouched.