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'Top Chef': Producers keep the show running through Kentucky's hills

By [LISA HORNUNG](#) | June 1, 2018 9:30 am



While "[Top Chef](#)" continues to film in Kentucky, the rest of us wait with bated breath (and napkins in our laps) for the world to see our culinary and natural landscape. While the show won't air until later this year and we can't tell you who's on it, we can still bring you an idea of what the "Top Chef" staff thinks about Kentucky so far.

Busy schedules mean less food exploration

Culinary Producer

[Jamie Lauren](#) hasn't been able to get out much in the four weeks she's been here.

During a scouting trip, she was able to eat at

[Star Hill Provisions](#), the restaurant at the

Maker's Mark Distillery. Otherwise, she said, the only local place she's eaten has been [Skyline Chili](#), which she enjoyed.

"We just haven't had a whole lot of time to go anywhere because I'm tired," Lauren said. "By the time we get done with the day I just want to go to my hotel room and go to bed. I don't want to deal, and I haven't had a day off in, like, in two weeks." Asked if she eats her meals at work, she said no. "I actually don't eat. I've been doing a lot of not eating lately, which is really funny because I'm actually a chef and I actually love food."

A lot of moving parts

Lauren was a contestant on Season 5 of "Top Chef" on Bravo in 2009, then came back for "Top Chef Allstars" and "[Top Chef Duels](#)." She's also been on "The Taste" (ABC), "[MasterChef](#)" (Fox) and "[Man vs. Child: Chef Showdown](#)" (FYI) and has appeared as a judge on "[Pressure Cooker](#)" (Food Network).

As culinary producer, Lauren's job is to shop for and maintain all the ingredients and cooking equipment on the show and to make sure it gets where it needs to be for filming. She changes

the pantry a bit based on where the show is shooting, so for Kentucky, she added bourbon, sorghum syrup, sorghum flour and more.

She always has the basic staples like flour, sugar, vinegar and the like.

“But then, you know, there are specialty things that are really cheffy, so things like yuzu and kimchi, and white anchovies and red curry paste,” she said. “So I try to diversify it with all of that stuff as well, just to just to make sure that we can have a well-rounded pantry.”

There are six people on the culinary team, and they make a lot of lists, Lauren said. She has to make sure that all the correct stuff is moved around. While they have a main stage to keep most of their items, the show moves around the state to places such as Lexington and Lake Cumberland. When the team hits the road, she fills a cargo van with pantry, then her team builds the entire pantry on location.



The pantry from “Top Chef” Season 2. It’s grown a lot since then. | Courtesy of Bravo

“I think people would be surprised that there’s so many moving parts, that there’s so much that goes into making all of these challenges and so many people involved and so many different departments involved,” Lauren said. “And also just the thought process that goes into everything. Like just thinking about what these ingredients are and what equipment they need for specific challenges how to get those things accomplished. You know, I don’t think people think it’s really that involved because they think it all just sort of ends up out there. But there’s a lot of thought behind it.”

Much of the food comes from Whole Foods, but specialty items, such as spices (she keeps 120 of them on hand) or anything exotic, have to be ordered. While she has no say in what challenges the chefs will face, she does meet with producers so she can plan what to have on hand and when.

When filming's done, there's always leftover food, and most of it either goes home with staff or is donated to a food pantry. But, Lauren admitted, some of it goes in the trash — mostly because of time constraints. She said that on "Top Chef Junior," there is more time because the show doesn't travel, so less food gets wasted.



"Top Chef" judges sitting at a table |
Courtesy of Bravo

Producing a reality competition show in Kentucky

Executive Producer Doneen Arquines grew up outside of Seattle but now lives in Los Angeles. She said she had no idea what to expect from Kentucky because she really had no frame of reference.

"I didn't know anything about burgoo or goetta or hot browns," she said. "Never heard of any of it. So knowing and finding out, 'Oh, there's really cool, specific, regional cuisine here!' It's different from anywhere else, and that made it cool and special. Also the history of the area and where people are

going, you know, it feels like everything's kind of on the move and moving into a really cool new direction."

She acknowledged that some people may think the show is "rigged" for certain contestants, but she adamantly denied that.

"Absolutely not," she said. "I swear. Obviously, there are certain things ... like moving people around that we have to be involved in, but really, the thing is I have no say in (the judging), and I don't try and push anything because I trust their opinions. They're the ones tasting the food. And it really comes down to what they think."

She added that it's fun to see the changes in the contestants as they progress through the season because some who she thought might be the strongest can have a bad day or some who might be weaker in the beginning can rise to the competition.

Scouting out the Bluegrass State

Arquines traveled all over the state when scouting Kentucky for the show.

"I think that I'm experiencing Kentucky in a way that even Kentuckians haven't experienced Kentucky," she said. "We hit all of the stops, you know, we went everywhere and we got to experience everything ... going to Churchill Downs and Keeneland, but also like checking out the Red River Gorge and Lake Cumberland and looking at all of these cool different areas I'm not familiar with being from the West Coast. I had no idea that there was such a huge lake (Cumberland) in Kentucky!"

While her busy schedule has impeded her chances to eat much local food, she's managed to eat better than Lauren. She's been to [Milkwood](#), [Decca](#) and [Royals Hot Chicken](#) so far. She was looking forward to having a couple of days off to explore a few more places to eat.

Like [Padma Lakshmi](#), she likes to talk to locals about the best places to eat.

"Everywhere we go, you know we spend a lot of time scouting locations and meeting people and talking to the local chefs and

people. We're kind of immersed into the food scene here, trying to understand what is special to them."

She said the 'Top Chef' will show Kentucky to the world

"I think, you know, obviously there are people that are familiar with Kentucky, but the people that aren't will be really surprised, I think, by what they see. And it's interesting because my sister actually lives in Tennessee. I'm only a couple hours away (from Kentucky) when I visit. But, you know, it's still different — Tennessee is so close but yet very different from Kentucky."

Like Lakshmi, Arquines raved about Kentucky's beauty.

"The landscape it's also an interesting thing to me, you know, being in Lexington and seeing the horse farms and the rolling hills is very pretty," she said. "And then also being in Louisville and being right on the river, and you know it's so green right now it's really, really beautiful. And when we go out to the lake, that will also be another really interesting thing, so I think people will be really interested in the landscape of the area and the terrain."

You can participate in 'Top Chef'!

Good news fans, if you want to participate, you can send an email to KentuckyTopChef@gmail.com. Not sure what kind of participation you'll be able to get, but it sounds like fun.



LISA HORNUNG

Lisa Hornung a native of Louisville and has worked in local media for more than 15 years as a writer and editor. Before that she worked as a writer, editor and photographer for community newspapers in Kansas, Ohio and Kentucky. She has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Georgia, and after a 20-year career in journalism, she obtained a master's degree in history from Eastern Kentucky University in 2016.



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