

Impossible not to be wowed by Chef Irvine



Chef Robert Irvine proves he has a soft side at the South Lake Tahoe Food and Wine Festival. Photos/Jessie Marchesseau

By Jessie Marchesseau

STATELINE – Chef Robert Irvine’s down-to-business attitude on “Restaurant: Impossible” can make him seem intimidating and unapproachable. In person, he is just the opposite.

An intimate dinner of less than 150 people gave guests an opportunity to interact personally with the chef. Irvine called the experience “bonding time” as he made it a point to stop at every table to chat, answer questions, take photos and sign copies of his cookbook.

At the various events, dressed in his signature jeans and T-shirt, Irvine took time to sign hundreds of autographs and

have his photo taken with just as many fans.

Eating and drinking were the main activities at the 4th annual South Lake Tahoe Food and Wine Festival Nov. 9-10 at Harrah's and Harveys casinos. The sold-out two-day festival offered guests a variety of experiences to choose from. Seven events allowed attendees a chance to learn something, taste something, drink something and/or rub elbows with a celebrity chef.

This year's star was Irvine, host of the Food Network television show "Restaurant: Impossible". Each year the festival highlights a different celebrity chef. Past years have brought names such as Martin Yan and Anthony Bourdain.



A chocolate sculpture by pastry chef Cathy Haynes featured at the Grand Market.

Saturday evening's Chef in the Kitchen event was a chance for diners to enjoy a three-course meal created by Irvine. He said he wanted the menu to be simple and classic.

"Doing the simplest thing and doing it well always wows people," Irvine said.

Harrah's pastry chef Cathy Haynes said Irvine came into the kitchens to introduce himself and shake hands with the rest of the staff, something that does not always happen when the celebrity chefs come to town.

"Robert Irvine was incredible. He went way above and beyond what we asked him to," said John Packer, director of entertainment and public relations for Harrah's and Harveys, told Lake Tahoe News. "He's just really a great performer."

At Saturday night's Chef on Stage, Irvine on multiple occasions wandered through the audience of more than 700. He answered cooking questions, personal inquiries, business questions and spent time joking with audience members. One heckler was asked to join him on stage and stand there holding a fire extinguisher for several minutes. Another he brought up and asked to do an ape impression, but not before Irvine did one himself.

When he wasn't mingling with the guests, Irvine was on stage cooking. Chef on Stage was an hourlong cooking demonstration. The night's lesson was seared halibut with haricot verts potato salad. Steam rose from his saucepans as the smell of sautéing garlic and onions wafted through the South Shore Room. The fish, on the other hand, did not smell. Irvine even walked around asking people to smell the raw halibut fillet in his hand to emphasize his point: fresh fish does not smell fishy.

The finished product was what Irvine called "sexy food." Just the smell in the room could make you salivate.

"Food is supposed to be fun and fictional, or factual, or just good," he told the audience.

Irvine said he chose halibut for the Chef on Stage demonstration because he gets more questions on how to cook good fish than any other cooking inquiry.

“I tried to show everyone something simple and how to do it well,” he said.



Braised veal breast with balsamic fig conserve and candied bacon by chef Eric Vaughn.

Irvine calls himself a simple cook, with comfort foods being his favorite things to cook, and eat.

But Irvine was not the only chef serving up delectable delights during the festival. While he may have been the headliner, Saturday's Grand Market is the anchor event for the entire weekend. More than a thousand people filed into the Harrah's special events center for a chance to sample the selection of gourmet food, wines and liquors.

The market is a chance for Caesars Entertainment, the company that owns Harrah's and Harveys, to showcase chefs from various properties. Small booths lined the walls of the event center, each one offering a different tapas-sized treat or tasting-sized beverage.

Chefs from Caesars properties in Las Vegas, Reno and Tahoe

demonstrated their creative talents with dishes specially invented for the event. More than one person, including my companion, declared the braised veal breast with balsamic fig conserve and candied bacon the best food there. Prepared by Eric Vaughn, executive chef for Paris, Bally's and Planet Hollywood casino-hotels in Las Vegas, the dish is something he described as incredibly labor-intensive. Even though it had rave reviews from tasters, will never make it onto the menu at any of his restaurants.

By far the most popular food station of the market, and my personal favorite, was Haynes'. It was the only one offering sweets, and unlike most tasting stations which only offered one dish, she and her staff prepared more than half a dozen bite-sized options for guests to try. In this case, Haynes said some of the more popular ones might actually make their way onto menus.

Also on her table were two chocolate showpieces created by Haynes and her pastry staff: a crate of "South Lake Tahoe Wine" bottles surrounded by fall leaves and a tall steam punk-esque sculpture with various gears and parts, both made entirely of chocolate.

"This is such a fun event," she said of the festival. "It's the one time of year we get to be creative."

In between tastings, visitors were entertained by cooking demonstrations with Andy LoRusso, "The Singing Chef," and an appearance and photo opportunities with Irvine. The aroma of LoRusso's Bellini's Pasta Norma filled the air, as did the sounds of him singing Italian songs while he cooked.

We spent nearly two hours tasting gourmet delights and mouth-watering wines, and though the Grand Market is just the kickoff event for an entire weekend of culinary affairs, we left feeling satisfied and humming the old-world Italian tunes of The Singing Chef.