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Food Network's 'Big Restaurant Bet' puts Fort Myers front and center, and I'm freaking out

"Big Restaurant Bet," a new Food Network show hosted by celebrity chef Geoffrey Zakarian, takes place in Fort Myers, and this Fort Myers kid is thrilled.



Annabelle Tometich

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I sat in a conference room at the Luminary Hotel in downtown Fort Myers in November.

I pulled down my mask and submitted to a nasal swab for my mandatory COVID-19 test. I laid out my multiple outfit possibilities for approval from the producers. I touched up my mascara and blotted the morning humidity from my cheeks with a tissue.

I told myself to stay calm. Be cool. Breathe.

And yet, *I was freaking out.*

I wasn't there for just-some-conference. I was there to be a judge on a then-unnamed Food Network reality show. I was sitting on a banquette in my hometown, a mere 10 minutes from the house where I was born, waiting to be on a TV channel I worshiped, a channel I watched religiously throughout college and deep into my 20s.

While my friends idolized Justin Timberlake and Britney Spears, my idols made "30-Minute Meals" and "Good Eats." They said things like "Bam!" They taught me *mirepoix* and *mis-en-place* and the difference between a bechamel and a veloute.

When I should have been studying organic chemistry formulas, I instead studied Alton Brown's meatloaf (just one egg, no more!) and Ming Tsai's coconut sticky rice.

Looking back, perhaps it's not surprising I skipped medical school in favor of cooking, a decision that's opened so many delicious doors for me.

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Although I never thought to dream — of this.

Fort Myers hasn't been the kind of place that lands a prime time, multiple-episode Food Network show. We've been a Food Network stop before, for Chef Tyler Florence and "The Great Food Truck Race" in 2019, for Mr. Brown and the feats of culinary wizardry he performs on his tours.

Fort Myers on TV: Tyler Florence's 'Great Food Truck Race' rolled through Fort Myers — here's the aftermath

But this project is different. It's a show that's purely Fort Myers, set in the City of Palms from start to finish.

The then-unnamed project has become "Big Restaurant Bet," a six-week competition series where Geoffrey and Margaret Zakarian give eight hopeful chef-restaurateurs a shot at a \$250,000 contract to open their own concept with Zakarian Hospitality Group.

It debuts tonight at 10 on Food Network.

“Opening a restaurant takes unwavering determination, razor sharp skill and unique culinary talent.” Zakarian told The Hollywood Reporter in February. “In

'Big Restaurant Bet,' viewers will follow the journey and dreams of eight talented chefs that are passionate about launching their own restaurant."

Due to super secretive, contractual obligations, I can't divulge much more. What I can say: I'm not on the show as a contestant (*whew, can you imagine??*), I'm just there to be my oh-so-judgmental self. And I'm not the only local face who'll be gracing your screens. My former food-writing colleague, Andrew Atkins, joins the judging action, as does Executive Chef Darren Veilleux of Sails in Naples. The brilliant Jovana Batkovic of Nice Guys in Cape Coral will also be casting judgments, as will country singer Ben Allen of Estero.

Whenever my episode airs, feel free to analyze my face for signs of my inner teenager losing her food-loving mind — if my eyes look glazed, if I can't seem to focus, that's her *freaking out*.

You can look for all of us in the coming weeks. For now, just sit back, relax and enjoy the show. Fort Myers is about to take center stage.

Annabelle Tometich is a food writer and restaurant critic for The News-Press and Naples Daily News. Sign up for her SWFL Eats newsletter; follow her on Twitter and Instagram; or send her a good old-fashioned email: atometich@news-press.com.