

## Q&A

PHILIP TESSIER

# He led the US team to its first win at the food world's Olympics

By Michael Floreak

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

California chef Philip Tessier achieved an honor in 2017 that couldn't have been imagined by the world's culinary elite a few decades earlier. Tessier coached the team of American chefs, led by Matthew Peters, who won top prize at the Bocuse d'Or, an international culinary competition that is often called the Olympics of the food world. Two years earlier, Tessier competed himself, leading the United States team that earned a silver medal among 24 nations, also a first for the United States.

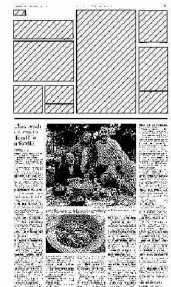
In the new book, "Chasing Bocuse: America's Journey to the Culinary World Stage" Tessier chronicles his experience from spectator to competitor to coach at the competition that is fiercely followed in Europe and beyond, but less known in the United States. After years of what Tessier describes as "friendly handshakes" at the competition, the win was welcome recognition for American cuisine. "Now, everyone's heads turn when we arrive," he says.

Before finding himself representing the United States, Tessier worked for two decades in some of the world's most renowned restaurants including Thomas Keller's Per Se, Bouchon, and The French Laundry. Tessier began training for the competition while working with Keller, who is also president of Ment'or, a non-profit organization that helps support the US Bocuse d'Or team.

**Q.** Your first exposure to Bocuse d'Or was as a spectator. What's it like to watch?

**A.** It's exhilarating. Even though I watched [documentaries on the competition] and had seen the team train here and there, nothing kind of prepares you for being in this stadium. It's kind of like being front row at Madison Square Garden. The UK was right next to us. They had their band there. Watching these chefs compete, [you see] the intensity, the number of people and cameras and everything that's down on the floor. These guys are just completely trying to ignore that. And then to see that food come out. When a winning platter comes up, it's noticed immediately. It was an addictive feeling.

**Q.** When it was your turn to compete as the US representative, how did you



prepare?

**A.** I think most people are used to cooking competitions being “Top Chef” and “Chopped,” where everyone is thinking on their feet for the most part. This is much more like an Olympic athlete training for their competition day. I want to be in the best physical shape I can be in, the best mental shape I can be in. We did CrossFit five days a week as a team. For me, it was a part-time job for eight months and then full time for four months. I liken it very much to a gymnast or a figure skater where you’re perfecting the twists, turns, jumps. And then you practice that routine to the point where on game day you hear the music and you know where to go. There’s no question in your mind.

**Q.** How many times did you and commis Skylar Stover practice your full day of cooking?

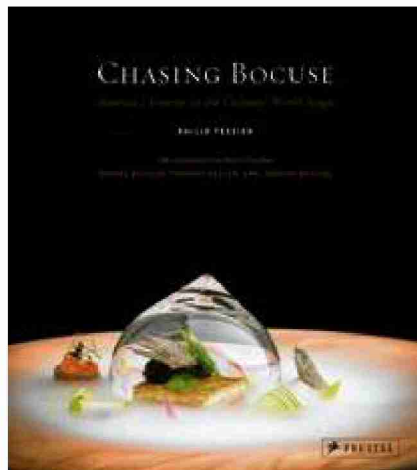
**A.** I don’t think we ever did the exact same run, even until the last day. I would say that in total we probably did

the meat 30 times. The full total run was probably between 15 and 18 times.

**Q.** Cooking in front of a stadium full cheering people is very different from a restaurant kitchen. How did you handle that?

**A.** We did every possible thing we could do to prepare for that experi-

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NADER KHOURI

‘None of this would really be possible without the transformation of cuisine in this country over the past 20 to 30 years. It’s created this fertile soil for us to come up and have our own style and voice and cuisine.’

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