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Sameh Wadi: The next 'Iron Chef'?

Steve Rice, Star Tribune

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The word is finally out, and it's huge: Sameh Wadi, chef/co-owner of **Saffron Restaurant & Lounge** (123 N. 3rd St., Mpls., 612-746-5533, www.saffronmpls.com), is making his "Iron Chef America" debut this month, going up against Masaharu Morimoto, the Iron Chef's Iron Chef. The episode first airs Jan. 24 at 8 p.m. on the Food Network. We caught up with Wadi this week.

Q Your "Iron Chef America" debut was shot last summer. That's a long time to keep a secret, isn't it?

A How do you think I feel [laughs]? I was humbled that they chose me. I believe that I'm the first Minnesota chef to compete, and they told me that at 25, I was the youngest chef to have ever competed.

Q How did you receive your "Iron Chef" invitation?

A When they called, I was out buying garbanzos and I was having a really bad day. My brother was here [at the restaurant] and

he answered the phone. He called me and said, "The Food Network called," and I said, "What, do we owe them money? Just pay them [laughs]." And he said, "No, they want you to be on a show." I wasn't in the mood for a joke, and I hung up on him. When I called them back, I was Googling the name of the man I was talking to, and sure enough, he was the producer of "Iron Chef." I couldn't believe it. I mean, I've been watching "Iron Chef" since I was 14.

Q What did you do when you got the news?

A After freaking out for a little while, we called our mother. She's like, "Why are you not on 'Top Chef,' isn't that the top?" When she got that "Iron Chef" was the top show, she was just ecstatic.

Q I know that, prior to the broadcast, you're contractually bound from revealing just about every detail of your experience -- I won't bother to ask about the dishes you made, because I already know that the answer is "No comment" -- but how would you have felt if Michelle Obama revealed that the secret ingredient was a vegetable from the White House garden, as she did on the episode that aired earlier this week?

A That would have been hard [laughs]. It's

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bad enough to go into unknown territory and work as if it's your own kitchen. But then you're watching Morimoto right next to you -- I mean, that was just surreal.

Q Were you nervous?

A I think I went through the 12 steps of nervousness [laughs]. Thank goodness I was able to bring two assistants with me: Kevin Manley and Nick O'Leary. They're my two favorite cooks; they've worked for me for a while, they know my cuisine. [O'Leary is now cooking at restaurant Max in downtown Minneapolis.] I was able to map out a strategy with them, write menus in my head -- you know, "If we get this, then we'll do this, and if we get that, then we'll do that." The preparation was emotionally draining. As a chef, I like to know what's available and what's not available, but on the show you walk into a brand new situation and create a meal that you will be remembered by forever.

Q That pretty much defines nerve-racking, doesn't it?

A You have to represent yourself first of all. Then the restaurant. And I wanted to show that we have a really great culinary scene here in Minneapolis and we can hang with the big boys.

Q Who was in the studio audience?

A They have a V.I.P. section where you can bring friends and family members, so we had a little cheering section. My mom was there; she was so proud. There are cameras everywhere. The production is amazing. I always respected what they did on the show, but having done it I have so much more respect for what's going on behind the scenes. The actual competition is one hour, on the dot. They told us a few things before it started, but nothing that really helped us tremendously.

Q Are you planning an event for when the episode airs?

A Hopefully, I'll be cooking and very busy. We're not going to be able to hold that many people [at Saffron]. We're planning on doing something at the Hotel Minneapolis, probably an invitation thing, but we don't have all the details worked out yet.

Q Will any of the dishes that you produced during the show find their way onto the Saffron menu?

A I'm not sure about that yet. We'll see. We have to clear everything through them.

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Q I know you can't say whether or not you won, but what are you wishing for in terms of fallout?

A Hopefully, this is a door-opener for us. I've been working hard to put our name out there, to put out that Middle Eastern cooking can be done in an upscale way. There's a lot riding on me and what I want to accomplish with this restaurant, and I don't want to let people down.

Q What did you do when the hour was over? Collapse?

A Then it went to a whole different stress level, because now we can't talk about it. The three of us talked about it -- you know, what happened, a play-by-play, amongst ourselves -- but we aren't allowed to discuss it with anyone else. Everyone, including our family, signed privacy notes with lots of zeroes at the end. No one has said a word.

Q Aside from your own knives, were you allowed to carry anything else into the studio? Sorry, "kitchen stadium"?

A They have such a well-stocked kitchen. You say, "I need a sauce pot," and 15 people respond with, "We have 50 different kinds,

which one would you like?" That's how I want my restaurant to be.

RICK NELSON

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