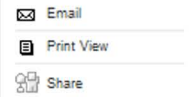


## Reality check, please

Harold Dieterle on growing pains at Perilla and blowing his \$100,000 winnings on dinner at Per Se

By Matt Rodbard, Metromix



Strong reviews prove this top chef is no flash in the pan  
(Credit: Melissa Horn)

In person, just like he did as the top dog on season one of "Top Chef," Harold Dieterle speaks in short, intense soundbites, answering questions with the same manic energy as if he were in the kitchen quickly knocking out a plate of spicy duck meatballs: "Cooking in Bangkok is phenomenal, especially if you want to learn the basics of Asian street food...To do a real soft opening, just lie."

Since opening **Perilla**, his West Village debut named after an exotic strain of Thai mint, Dieterle hasn't had much time to talk beyond the basics. Along with running the kitchen (and, yes, plating almost every dish), he's dealt with critics, cooking *without* gas and blogging weekly about the new season of "Top Chef." For 15 minutes on a rainy summer morning, we asked him to cut loose.

### What was the biggest challenge you faced to get Perilla's doors opened?

The day we opened, this physical plant guy thought it would be a great idea to re-label all the circuit breakers, and in the process he shut off our gas—two-and-a-half hours before guests were to arrive! If you walked by, you would have said there was no fucking way we

were going to do it. But everybody just put their heads down and banged it out.

### How were you able to open Perilla on your terms?

I had to lie a little bit. Tell people you are opening in four months, and then open the doors up that night. It will buy you a week or two.

### When you were staffing your kitchen, did you throw any of the candidates a Quick Fire Challenge?

Not really. The process is more me sitting down and having a conversation with the person. I would rather work with somebody who is green than somebody who has bad habits, simply because I can teach them to cook my food.

### Why open in the Village?

I like the way people live and dine downtown. I'm just not an uptown guy. I don't wear a suit and tie and prefer a T-shirt and flip-flops. That's the restaurant I wanted to create, where those types of people can come in.

### You've traveled extensively around Thailand. Where did you go to eat?

Bangkok is phenomenal, especially if you want to learn the basics of Asian street food. I cooked for three weeks at the Amari Watergate, but it was more observing: watching the cooks make curries and balance the flavor profiles. I picked cardamom seeds and peeled ginger.

### How did you blow through your \$100,000 wad?

It went really fast. A good part of it was spent toward the restaurant. I lived off the rest. I did take my girlfriend to Per Se—she wanted to eat there really badly. That's not my type of restaurant, but it was her birthday. The chef [Thomas Keller] was in the house, and the whole experience was amazing.

### Let's cut to it: What do you think of the new season of "Top Chef"?

There are a couple of people who have considerable skills, but nobody can make their best food in that atmosphere. On the show, you can never relax. You are always under the gun to make a dish. Then, you have to hear what the judges have to say, and they are straight-up harsh sometimes.

### Did you go into challenges knowing what you would make?

The last challenge is when you have time to conceive dishes. You assume they were going to allow two crazy, talented people make a full tasting menu paired with wine. TV viewers respond to talent and want to see good food. That's why they're watching.

### And probably why they aren't watching the disastrous "Hell's Kitchen."

I think people are watching that show, but it falls into the genre of trash reality TV. I could never be on the show. I would lose my fucking mind.

### You've had strong reviews in Time Out and The New Yorker, but still no Bruni. How do you treat the reviewing process?

I have people working here with laser eyes. When they see somebody who looks suspicious, they tip me off and I look closely at their order. A critic's table will taste the entire menu, and you will never find anything ordered twice. From there, I make sure everybody's food is really nice, tasting everything and making sure it is sent out in a manner that I can focus on every dish.