



“The chefs/entertainers have had a tremendous effect on how America eats, in a good way. Look at the '70s and '80s. Everyone was buying frozen TV dinners, but today people are making things from scratch. It's a great thing that people are willing to cook and not open a frozen box to eat dinner.”

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Beef Hanger Steak with pickled sauce and chiles.

# Iron Mike

When Michael Symon's name was announced as a winner of the James Beard Foundation's 2009 award for Best Chef Great Lakes on May 4, only one thing raced through the *Iron Chef's* mind, "make sure you thank Liz [his wife]." It was the highlight of Symon's still-burgeoning career – the awards are widely regarded as the Oscars of food – but his immediate thought of thanking those who helped him get to where he was sitting that night is what keeps Symon a one-of-a-kind creative force in the culinary industry.

Michael Symon has heard the full gamut of adjectives used to describe him. His supporters have hailed him as witty and candid, and his detractors call him a "punk." Once he was even referred to as "the Vin Diesel of the food industry" (whether that was a compliment or an insult remains to be determined). In reality, he is an unassuming guy. Casually cool, Symon's personality seems to be the middle between the two extremes of "celebrity chef" personas the Food Network has created the last ten or so years. Nationally he is an *Iron Chef* and locally he helped shape a city's dining culture as the proprietor of two restaurants in his hometown, Cleveland. He recently brought home culinary



glory as the first recipient of the James Beard Award to live and work in Cleveland. He very well could be the epitome of the next generation of chefs, but despite all his fame and success, Symon refuses to take all the glory.

"You are only as good as the people around you," he insists while sitting at the bar of his downtown Cleveland restaurant, Lola. "I would never have had the success I've had without them. You can give the greatest coach in the world the worst team, and he might be able to field a good team out of them, but they will never be a great team. You need to surround yourself with great people in order to be great. Any chef or business owner who is under



By Mark Toriski



the false illusion that it is all about them is full of it.”

Lola Bistro is the first chapter in Michael Symon’s still-young legacy (which is on the rise with two more restaurants in Cleveland in the works), but the restaurant speaks volumes about his character. It has all the gloss and polish of any upscale restaurant you’d find in a metropolis, but Symon has created a high-class environment

and menu without alienating the blue-collar spirit of his fellow Clevelanders. His bar is stocked with many exquisite, high-priced wines, but the item he is proudest of on the bar menu is an artisan beer made by a small brewery near Detroit (where he owns a third restaurant, Roast) named Jolly Pumpkin Artisan Ales. His food is superb and has won him national recognition, yet on closer inspection you will see even pierogies grace the menu (albeit gourmet pierogies stuffed with tender shavings of beef cheek).

“Food culture translates into a cultural identity,” says Symon. “Look at the other regions successful for food: Texas is

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southwestern, there is California cuisine, New Orleans has a very distinctive style. I tell people all the time that you can’t find another city the size of Cleveland that has the same food scene, there isn’t one. Cleveland’s dining culture has skyrocketed. I remember that 20 years ago, you could barely get fresh fish. It’s mind numbing to see where it is now. There were a lot of chefs back then who laid a

lot of groundwork for chefs like me to become successful. We are a second-tier food city.”

If Symon has one phrase to describe his style of cooking it is “meat-centric,” which combines the Midwestern style of cooking with ethnic flair (the pierogies once again come to mind). “A lot of spit-roasted meats, curing, and a lot of meats on the grill. It’s all very Greek,” says Symon, who is part Greek and Italian. “I’m not

necessarily a butter and cream guy. I try to take the natural fat of meats over butter or cream and pair it with things that are more acidic.” Symon’s love of meat is permanently displayed on his body with a tattoo that honors his love of pork (he has also worked

## THE COOK’S BOOKS:

Culinary author Michael Ruhlman discusses his literary passion for food

Michael Ruhlman is a food philosopher. He doesn’t see the need to eat as just a biological function that is necessary for the human race to survive. Ruhlman sees food as just a spiritual, communal, and emotional necessity for the human soul. “We have to have it or we die. It’s more important than love. To understand the common ground we share – food and eating – seems to be a no-brainer. How can you not be interested in it?”

Ruhlman certainly is. The Cleveland resident has dedicated his life and career to all things food. He authored an in-depth look at the Culinary Institute of America and has written and co-written nearly a dozen books, including two collaborations with Michael Symon, (2000’s *The Soul of a Chef* and a cookbook coming out this November titled *Michael Symon’s Live to Cook: Recipes and Techniques to Rock Your Kitchen*). Commenting on Symon, he says “He is so much fun to work with. It is fun to hang out with this guy and work with him and explore his cooking more. He really does home food well. It’s chef food that is worthy of natural attention and also really economically ingenious in its simplicity, and so that’s what I really like about it. I tend to overcontemplate cooking.” But Ruhlman makes no apologies for his overall views on food and man. “It is important that we cook more. It makes us happy, healthier, and nourishes our souls. I like to encourage people to cook and eat together. It helps us understand ourselves and who we are. It is part of our humanity. It needs to be explored endlessly.”

For more information on Michael Ruhlman visit [www.ruhlman.com](http://www.ruhlman.com).

Michael Symon prays to the Goddess Lola.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** The *Iron Chef* at work.



“I would have mom’s lasagna, head cheese, a perfectly roasted chicken, an heirloom tomato salad, fries...”

— Michael Symon chooses his last meal wisely



**BELOW:** Beef Cheek Pierogies with wild mushrooms and horseradish crème fraîche.

with a Cleveland-area tattoo artist on a T-shirt line that celebrates cooking).

A 1990 graduate from the Culinary Institute of America in New York, Symon started his career working in some of Cleveland’s then-up-and-coming restaurants, including Player’s, Piccolo Mondo, Giovanni’s, and The Caxton Café. His work brought him such a devout following as he moved from restaurant to restaurant that his star was already on the rise by the time he opened Lola in its original location in Cleveland’s Tremont neighborhood in 1997 (the restaurant would eventually move downtown in 2005 with his second restaurant, Lolita, filling its former space). The restaurant garnered rave reviews early, and Symon was on the cusp of helping ignite a dining revolution in his hometown. That same year he was named National Rising Star by *Restaurant Hospitality* magazine, and from there the awards and accolades came pouring in. He was named one of the Ten Best New Chefs in America by *Food & Wine* magazine in 1998, Lola was named one of America’s Best Restaurants by *Gourmet* magazine in 2000, he was featured in the book *The Soul of a Chef*, and he began making appearances on television series, including *The Melting Pot*, *Sara’s Secrets*, *Food Nation*, and *Ready, Set, Cook*.

Then came *Iron Chef America*. In 2007, the Food Network created their own reality-show competition, *The Next Iron Chef*, to search for a permanent 8th member of their elite team. Symon once had been a guest on the series in a season-two episode, where he lost to Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto. Despite the defeat, he still received the call. “The Food Network had a list of 100 chefs they thought were the best in the country,” says Symon of their selection process. “Then the Iron Chefs whittled it down to who they thought were the eight most capable of competing against each other. I thought it was an honor just being one of 100.”



The series presented the contestants with eight challenges, testing them on qualities like speed, artistry, simplicity, innovation, resourcefulness, and pressure. Symon would win four of the challenges before being named *The Next Iron Chef*. “That was a life-changing experience,” he says of the victory. “No award has ever been this life-changing for me. I have always been well respected in my field, but this made people stand up and take notice about what was going on in Cleveland. It took the respect I always had in the industry and made it broader.”

Currently, Symon has had only one loss on *Iron Chef America* (a series he describes as “controlled chaos”), and his presence as a celebrity chef is felt nationally. He has inspired a legion of fans, which helped earn him an interim host position on another Food Network series *Dinner: Impossible* in 2008, and this November, he will release a cookbook, *Michael Symon’s Live to Cook: Recipes and Techniques to Rock Your Kitchen*, cowritten by fellow Clevelander Michael Ruhlman. But true to form, Symon is most grateful for his ability to spread his joy of cooking with a nation while garnering attention to the hometown he loves. “As I started having some success on a national level, some people were afraid I was going to leave,” he says. “I told them the only thing that would get me to leave was if I felt I couldn’t do the things I wanted to do as a chef [here]. This city has been so tremendously supportive to me and my restaurants that I will never leave. It’s my home.” **ELM**

*Lola Bistro is located at 2058 East 4th Street Cleveland, Ohio. Lolita is located at 900 Literary Road Tremont, Ohio. For more information visit [www.lolabistro.com](http://www.lolabistro.com).*

*Additional Sources: [foodnetwork.com](http://foodnetwork.com), [Cleveland.com](http://Cleveland.com).*