



Next Level Chef
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Press Pack

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Press Pack with Gordon Ramsay, Paul Ainsworth and Nyesha Arrington.

Please do ensure quotes from all three mentor Chefs are included in any features.
All embargoed until 00.01 30th December 2022.

Press Pack Quotes:

GR – Gordon Ramsay

PA – Paul Ainsworth

NA – Nyesha Arrington

Can you tell us a little about Next Level Chef?

GR: When we first entered lockdown, I was reflecting back to the beginning of my career, because I started in the Basement. Then you work up into this semi decent kitchen. And then 20 years later, you build this stunning, beautiful state of the art kitchen, and the idea was born. How do you flip flop from each kitchen? And how do you combine all that experience into one show, on three different levels? I've worked in two different kitchens on top of each other before, I've never quite done three. So it was a sort of a gang busting idea.

GR: I think it's the first of its kind. And having been involved with many shows, from Hell's Kitchen to MasterChef, this is a combination of everything that I've ever done in the last 15 years. But the new inclusion of social media stars is something that a lot of top chefs are very sniffy about. I welcome them with open arms, because they're some of the most talented, gifted chefs on the planet today.

NA: I would say that Next Level Chef is really a first of its kind show. I had the privilege to go and guest judge on MasterChef. And when they talked to me about this idea, they were talking me through it and the whole competition is truly unbelievable. I was like - wait, so the ingredients are coming down on a little mini elevator, through the kitchens, and it's all timed? It's incredible. I also really value mentorship, so it's very imperative to me to be able to pass down knowledge and legacy.

PA: I think the big thing for me was just seeing the change in people from the beginning, as each episode went by, you just saw them all - even the ones that went home early - just getting better and better. I think as a viewer, you get just a phenomenal show - from cooking tips to self help really. In terms of the actual competition itself, it is truly staggering. It's phenomenal.

What makes Next Level Chef so different from other cooking shows?

GR: There's been great cooking shows out there, from Great British Bake Off to Great British Menu to MasterChef. What separates Next Level Chef for me is the fact that there's no format to what they're cooking. They're cooking what they're grabbing. And being spontaneous is the most exciting part of being a Chef, whether you're domestic social or professional, because you have no idea what's coming down. And then on each and every level, it depletes so by time we get down to the Basement, which no one wants to be in but

that's where you find the most about yourself, there's minimal ingredients. Ingredients that weren't wanted by other floors. And there's a bonus from time to time where some of the best ingredients end up in Basement because the other chefs on higher floors have been a little bit too sceptical about choosing. It is uniquely different because the cooks have no idea what's going on that platform. Sometimes it can be a fish challenge, sometimes you have shellfish, sometimes steak and so they have no idea what's coming. The majority of cooking competitions, I'm not saying they play safe, but they have to give a lot of insight to what's coming and what you should be looking for. Next Level Chef is raw. They are cooking on the fly and that's the bit that excites me the most - the nervous energy when they see that platform moving.

What makes Next Level Chef so different from other cooking shows?

NA: The bottom, Basement kitchen is pretty basic, definitely the sort of kitchen that I started in. The Middle kitchen is kind of like a catering kitchen - it has all the things you need. The Top level, where there's immersion circulators, smokers – they have the best pans, the best equipment. The kind of kitchens where I've worked in Fine Dining. I think the brilliance in this show is that the levels of the kitchens sort of level the playing field for the chefs. The pro-chefs probably go in thinking they're going to kill it in these Fine Dining kitchens. And then they might be put in the Basement where they haven't worked for years. There's dull knives and they have to really use their ingenuity to make a delicious dish. And on the opposite end, you have home chefs that have never been in these beautifully lit, pristine kitchens, and they all of a sudden have all of these tools at their disposal, so they can up their game. They're very imaginative and creative with it. I particularly love that idea of levelling the playing field. But really, I would say the antithesis of the show is that it is based in mentorship and that is incredible. And not being too far out of cooking competitions myself, your brain is on a bullet train to try to create a dish under the most amount of pressure. It's pretty cool to have someone like Gordon, Paul or myself there to help be the voice of reason.

PA: It's so high octane. And so high energy. And it's tough. The contestants start each cook running over to a platform and choosing ingredients in 30 seconds before it drops down to the next floor. It's not impossible but is truly demanding. You're nervous and trying to come up with a dish on the spot. Everyone could run over there and just do a massive sweep with their arm. So there's a really clever rule, if you grab it you use it. Then you might get a mid round drop where you've got another ingredient to add to your dish. Then finally, after cooking, you've got to get your finished dish back onto the platform before time runs out. It's a challenge and I think it will be a great watch.

Paul, what was it like working with Gordon, obviously you've got a long history together?

PA: Surreal. I think I might get a bit better at answering this question as time goes on, but hand on heart, the best way I can describe it is just to tell you the very short version of our history. I left Southampton I moved to London and I worked for the amazing Gary Rhodes. Gordon Ramsay was a chef that was massively up and coming. Nobody knew who he was outside of the industry. He had two Michelin stars at the time. I was just drawn to want to go work for Gordon. We had a Sunday off and me and the boys were in a pub in Pimlico. One of the lads said Gordon Ramsay's just pulled up to that phone box. He was in a silver Golf GTI. I just had to pluck up the courage because I knew I wanted to be a part of his team, he had a good reputation and he was a real taskmaster. Anyway, I ran out of the pub and ran across

the road. He was ages on this call. I just waited outside the phone box. He came out and he was just such a giant character. I couldn't get my words out. I eventually said that I would really love to come and work for him. He wrote down the kitchen number. And that was that - I went and worked for him for six years. And I started at the very bottom. When I left there, I was a sous chef. I moved to Cornwall and I've gone on and done my own thing. There's a sort of camaraderie between the apprentice and the master. But I'm no longer the apprentice now! I'm like, how did this happen? How is this a thing? But I give as good as I get on this show. I think I've tried to bring all those things that people would love to say to Gordon and take the mickey out of him. But in all honesty, he loves it. He absolutely takes it all in good humour.

Nyesha, what was it like working with Paul?

NA: Well, Gordon and Paul have worked with each other before so it's super funny to witness their banter. I say they're both very different personalities. Gordon had mentored Paul in previous restaurants. This was the first time I've worked with Paul, he was so inspiring every day, his energy alone and his infectious smile was enough to want me to try to do my best...and to kick their butts the kitchen! We just had so much joy. There's a beautiful camaraderie between all three of us, but also a level of competitiveness. I said this to Gordon, I haven't had these butterflies in my stomach since I was a line cook in 2005, working in two Michelin star restaurants, crazy hecticness.

Gordon, what was it like working with Paul and Nyesha?

GR: Nyesha is one of the most prolific females. I think of Clare Smyth, Angela Hartnett - Nyesha Arrington walks the same ground, she's that prolific. Her and I sparked the most amazing relationship together because we both worked for Joel Robuchon so we have both trodden and followed in each other's foot paths on a similar background. Incredibly talented, steely, feisty, warm, comforting and just direct. Everything you'd want in an amazing Chef. An absolute talent. And then Paul Ainsworth, for me was a coming of age. I saw this guy at 19 turning up, knocking on my back door for a job and he had the biggest baby's face and looked the youngest out of anyone in my brigade, ever! Almost like he nipped off from school at the age of 14 and snuck into the local restaurants. A huge heart. This guy's determination is incredible. Having a mum from the Seychelles meant that he had that influence early on in his cooking career which has set him up for success. The determination of him, I knew having him alongside Nyesha and I would just work. It was also quite an emotional moment for me because he was part of my dream team at the beginning, when Royal Hospital Road won its third star. He was part of that dream team back in 2001. Incredibly focused and loyal. It was a bit of an amazing moment for me as a chef / mentor because he'd finally risen up to the level I thought 15 years ago, he would climb to.

What can we expect from some of the contributors?

GR: We've got an array, from individuals that are focused on their career but have now realised, especially on the back of the pandemic, that food is their calling. We've seen this year, a lot of flip flopping where people are denouncing what they've studied and went to University for and food is their new calling. Accountants, ex-Military, Models, Corporate

Business people, a Paralympian so an extraordinary collection of people. Talented mums, talented dads and some really cross sector individuals.

GR: The most imaginative cooking in my opinion was from the social media chefs, because they have no boundaries. They've got no rules. They've got no Good Food Guide or Michelin Guide. They haven't gotten 10 years of experience in fine dining restaurants. They go off-piste. They are so creative. Their level of concentration on one plate that's what they do, and it was incredible to see. They are very, very individual, they're not team players, they don't work with a team. They don't have to cook for families. They're just cooking down a lens, whether it's on Tik Tok or Instagram or any platform on social media, and they're just creating one plate. And that's quite rare - unlike home cooks, family orientated, professional chefs cooking for restaurants, these guys were unstoppable.

NA: We have some professional chefs – one travels the world cooking on a mega yacht. They dock and he sources all these ingredients and cooks for this family and has expendable cash accounts for his food. He was interesting to watch and to see his repertoire. You also have people that are home cooks that just bring the most beautiful joy in their cooking. I always say that you have to put the love in food. And I think that you can see it when the home cooks talk about what they made for their child for dinner, the love that they're able to include – it's a superpower that they're able to draw from. As professional chefs we learn different skills and techniques, but being able to draw from your family heritage and your love - those are the food memories, right? When I think about my grandmother cooking for me, literally that is what inspired me to be a chef. These home cooks are creating those food memories for their kids, you can truly taste it. There's another person who is a dentist, and just happens to love cooking and throws dinner parties, and half of his family is from China and half of his family is from India. It's super interesting to see this repertoire be represented on a plate.

PA: When I tell people about the show, I'm asked how does a home cook go against a professional chef? And you know what, you'd be very, very surprised. You might find someone who is in corporate business and who, every moment they get, they're cooking. They have got hams, sausages, a shed full of pickles and condiments. Sometimes when you've got people like that who are so obsessed with cooking, you feel it's just the real thing. With the prize money, they would be able to give up that corporate world and make cooking a living. And you've got quite a few characters in the show that are like that, it actually made them a real force to be reckoned with. I think that's a really interesting dynamic. I love it. You've got these worlds colliding, but it just brings out so much good stuff. And though we can't help them cook, it was a joy to not just stand there and mentor with words, but to actually roll your sleeves up, run around the kitchen with them.

What can the contestants win?

GR: I wanted to come out the gate with a prize that was unmatched. I wanted to offer something that was somewhat unique. We offer the most amazing one year mentorship for these individuals from Paul, Nyesha and myself. From my HQ, tapping into the whole social media platform, the development team from a restaurant on the river, to a one star, two star or three star Michelin environment. Then access to Nyesha and all her incredible knowledge. And then with Paul down in Cornwall who has absolutely captured the essence of Cornwall

with the sustainability and all the ingredients and just the whole oasis of what Cornwall offers. All for 12 months. It's all about what they want to get from it, we're going to tailor make this incredible mentorship for them. And that was a prize that money can't buy. The £100,000, that's a fantastic, an added bonus. The real prize is the mentorship because if you can't get what you want from a prize like that, then you're in the wrong competition.

PA: It was something that we spoke about from the very start. I moved to Cornwall, just me, two others in the kitchen and two out front. And now, 17 years on, we've got 166 people that we employ. And my job now is to be that mentor to all these different personalities. I can't wait to get stuck in with the winner. Once the cameras stopped rolling, they've got £100k. But it's about what happens now, because that's the most important bit. They may want to set up a café, they want to set they want to buy themselves a food truck, or they want to put it towards getting themselves off the ground or have money to invest more heavily into their social media content - whatever it would be. I just said I'd like to offer everything that we are as a business. Spend time in the kitchen and you can spend time out front, you can come to the office and see how the operations run behind the scenes. Whilst the £100,000 pound is amazing, a year long mentorship is what it's all about and what makes this different to other cooking competition prizes. It's money can't buy.

NA: It's pretty awesome. I would arguably say that the intangible wins are actually one of the most important parts of the competition. You get to draw knowledge from three different individuals with three different skill sets, three different journeys. And I mean, that information is invaluable. Three different perspectives, three different walks of life. The amount of life tools, skills, technique, business knowledge, social acumen - all of these tools that are essentially fuelling the culinary dreams of someone who earned it. And obviously, also the huge amount of cash.

So what would you say is the toughest part for the contestants?

GR: It's tough in any competition. But I guarantee the minute they leave the competition, they leave better than they came in. The hardest part for the competitors in my mind is the grabbing of ingredients. 30 seconds is no time - think how long you ponder down an aisle in the supermarket - Waitrose, Tesco, Sainsbury's, there's food everywhere. This is a limited platform of ingredients and a limited time. You have to use everything you pick up within the dish. You're cooking to survive in the competition, to get yourself up to that next level. So overdo it, and it's too complicated. Under do it and it's insufficient. For me, that's the hardest bit, the grab. And sometimes there's a second round grab. It might be an array of citrus or herbs or canned food that they have to incorporate in the middle of cooking their dish. It's tough.

PA: It's the whole thing. It's running to the platform and having a 30 seconds to try and think what you're going to cook. It's the plating up when the platform comes down again. They're both really difficult. I think to run to a platform, not knowing what's on it. You might not be familiar with the food or the theme that week might not be your strong point. It's so demanding. Everyone will be sat in their armchairs saying how they would do it. Trust me, when you're in it, it is a really tall order and it's amazing what they produce. It's amazing what comes from it.

Were there any cooking disasters on the show?

NA: When I hear the word disaster, I think of like fire and flames, but I think sometimes flavour combinations can be a disaster. And, wow, there was one! This was a first for me, in my experience in judging, where I truly felt revolted by a dish. I don't want to sound too harsh but you must taste your food as you go! There was this dish that was very...it was just creamy and fish - it just did not work. And I thought about it all weekend, it was not good!

Would you find this challenging?

GR: I'd find this challenge a f****g nightmare. I so would because I got taught by some of the best chefs on the planet. And they had a way. And it was their way or the highway. And if you didn't master what they gave you to do, you were out. So Next Level Chef is about bringing the best out of individuals and seeing how they pivot quickly across 45 minutes with ingredients that they may have never cooked before. So that is the real magic of the show in terms of watching them get into that.

Are there any standout dishes from the show that you can still remember now?

GR: Yeah, oh my god, so many. But there was a beautiful Indian infused Spice batter fish and chips. It's funny, growing up with fish and chips was a treat on a Friday night. In Scotland, we'd have fish supper. Mum and dad never went and bought all our own supper, we had to share one. I shared one with my little brother and my big sister shared one with my sister. So just that fish supper, essence of fish and chips wrapped in paper, mushy peas, curry sauce. As a nine year old kid, you thought this was the best thing since sliced bread. It just lifted your night. So this dish took me back to those lovely memories.

Is it more challenging if you are in the Basement compared to the Top kitchen?

GR: Way more challenging the Basement. The hardest but one of the best places to be in. My career started in the basement. I'm lucky to be at the very top but I've worked hard to stay at the top. But I'm much more confident in the Basement than I am at the Top. You know they are depending on the latest blender or water bath. The latest char, diamond cut grill to cook fish or to mark the fish on. The essence and the power is in the Basement. You're just absolutely cooking. For me, my mom started working as a chef in a little restaurant called The Cobweb House in Stratford upon Avon. I used to go and see her after football. And this kitchen was in the basement, the stairs were awful, the poor waiters. I used to go down two flights of stairs and there was my mum in the basement. So that's the stern reminder of where it began for me. There was no windows, sh*tty air conditioning, half the ingredients were missing. Whatever mum didn't sell in the restaurant that day, the owner would give it to her to take home for the kids. So I used to take home stuff. She always wanted me to help her on a Saturday because that's when she would bring the most food home. The basement for me is the place that I'm at my happiest because I've got so many amazing memories of being there every Saturday afternoon, picking up my mom's bags, tiny staircase, and then walking home. If the bus wasn't there, we just would walk home with bags full of food.

PA: You're kind of on the ropes in the Basement, you get the slim pickings. It's basically all the stuff that the Middle level and Top level didn't want. But also, the equipment is absolutely knackered, they've genuinely got saucepans that have completely lost their non-stick. There are no blenders, there aren't any kind of machines. No mixers, blenders, no handheld liquidisers - none of that. All you've got is some blunt knives, and little plastic chopping board

and a camping stove. And some of the dishes that came out of the Basement were just absolutely brilliant.

NA: I also think it's really hard when you have to work in a new environment every single time almost. You just find your stride and just start to think 'okay, I remember that this level kitchen has this and it doesn't have this' and you're also thinking about your dish and so many other things. And then the next episode, you have to potentially go and work on another level where everything is different. It's very challenging. But regardless of what level you're on, the Basement, Middle or Top - its freakin flavour that wins. You can make a chili, a bowl of soup and it's all about the flavour. I think the Basement is an opportunity and that's kind of my positive, optimistic outlook on it. I think sometimes when chefs get to that Top kitchen, it's well lit, you've all of the tools, and it's almost overwhelming. They think 'Oh, I've got to make this fine dining, little tiny, elegant thing'. It just gets overthought. I've seen some brilliant dishes come out of the Basement.

What would you say is the best piece of advice you've received throughout your career?

PA: Lots. The best piece of advice that I've received a long time ago was make everything about the people within our businesses. That is something that is just now embedded in everything I do. If you make everything about the people and realise they are the greatest thing about your business, you can go on to achieve anything. This was something that when I was a young chef, I was very focused on cooking. Sometimes I wouldn't put the people first but now it's everything that I do and that's what it's all about. Even doing this show, it's about the people that entered and trying to make a difference in someone's life. Even the other 11 that didn't win, they're all winners. They've all been given this amazing platform and they can go and kick on.

NA: I would probably say I've had three mentors in my life – you know how you take on different people at different times of your life. My first mentor would always say, it's based on the result and that has always stuck with me.

What's the one piece of advice you would give to anyone that wants to give this a go?

GR: Get a friend round for dinner. Ask them to give you a bag of ingredients that you only get to see the minute they arrive and have fun with it. And that's what Next Level Chef is all about. Imagine your best friend dropping your bag of goods around for dinner. You have 45 minutes to cook something and off you go. You're pulling ingredients out the bag and you're just cooking on the fly. There's something that is so exciting about the energy it creates in the mind. That's what I suggest. And it's a really good way of having fun. Just let go, open the wine off at the table and see what you can rustle up.