

INSIDE CABLE'S STAR

Wanna be the next reality star? Producers may be looking for you right now. Having a talent helps, and so does a willingness to show your true colors (even if they're tattooed on your arm).

By JANET STILSON

A bullet-headed guy in a purple shirt sweats as he sits on a little upholstered stool, deep inside the Prey Bar & Lounge in New York's velvet-rope hipster area of Chelsea. His state of liquidity doesn't have to do so much with the blazing heat on this summer day as it does with the people sitting opposite from him — two casting producers. It's obvious he really wants the gig — to be one of a select few chosen to participate in season 2 of Bravo's reality cook-off series *Top Chef*.

But casting producer Randy Bernstein isn't just interested in this guy's culinary talents. And neither is Randy's cohort, Danielle Harrington. There's something more that these two want from Bullet Head, and it is something so simple: just a secret — dirty or otherwise. What is it about him that nobody knows? They tease him again and again. But the close-mouthed candidate just won't give it up.

Before the day is through, his gentle torturers will see a couple hundred more *Top Chef* wannabes. And a couple thousand people and many plane trips later, Randy and Danielle will have the final lineup of contestants for the next *Top Chef* season, which debuts later this year.

Pick out a day, any day, and chances are there's an assortment of TV types scouring America for people to star in reality TV shows. You can feel the vibrations with the few keystrokes it takes to get to classified ad sites like craigslist.com or the sites of established reality series like *The Real World*.

There's no telling who these talent scouts may be looking for.



CAREER MOVE: Some celebrities are making a career out of reality shows. Flavor Fave, the hype master of Public Enemy fame, is now in his third series on VH1, *The Flavor of Love*, in which he must select one of 20 women vying for his affections.



MAKING MACHINERY

Unscripted TV is fertile ground for everybody, from B-, C- and even D-list celebrities to struggling chefs and designers to every-man types from Main Street USA.

No matter what your state of mind or particular skill set, there's a chance you could qualify for a reality show. But first a few caveats: It helps to be young and attractive or young and a little — or a lot — quirky.

A few pointers

Need a few pointers? Let's circle back to Danielle and Randy.

They're in that Chelsea bar, and they've got to be dying for something stronger than water at this point. They've seen a stream of people for three hours straight. A Wall Street broker turned caterer, a froggy throated Italian restaurateur from the Bronx who cures his own olives. A young sous chef who can turn blocks of ice into giant Tiki gods. No wonder Danielle's thrown off a flip-flop.

Then the ice carver's younger brother shows up. The dude says he wants to prove he's better in the kitchen than his sibling. "He's always done everything better than me," he says.

Randy is skeptical about this turn of events. "You came here with a script, right?" he asks.

"Not really," the interloper says, ever so casually. Danielle laughs. "Have you seen the show?"

"Yeah. Every episode."

"Which one of the contestants are you most like?" she asks.

"I'd say Harold. 'Cause I'm really relaxed in the kitchen."

After he leaves, Randy sighs. "Everybody says they're like Harold." Harold Dieterle was last season's ever-so-calm in the kitchen *Top Chef* winner.

The next visitor is a short, wide-bodied person in a loud orange T-shirt that reads "Tequila — Have you hugged your toilet today?" She's an executive chef who sports scars all up and down her arms and tattoos



CALM, COOL AND COOKIN':

Harold Dieterle shares a moment with *Top Chef* mentor Tom Colicchio during the show's first season. The cool and collected Dieterle went on to win the competition.

on either side of her neck. She hasn't bothered to fill out an application, and she swears like a sailor.

"Do you think it's hard being a woman chef?" Randy asks.

"Absolutely."

"Why?"

"I think it puts you in a difficult position, because you don't want to be too nice, and you don't want to come off as a bitch."

"Why not?"

"Because it's difficult to manage people that are usually taller than you, larger than you and sometimes twice your age. I don't ask people to do things. But I also don't scream and yell at them."

Randy and Danielle ask her a few questions about what she likes to cook. Everyone breathes an internal sigh of relief when she doesn't compare herself to Harold.

"I think you're interesting," Danielle says finally.

"Interesting?! You should drink with me!"

In the end, Randy and Danielle ask Mr. Bullet Head and Ms. Tequila to come back for another interview. Mr. Tiki and his kid brother are nixed.

What separated the winners from the

losers in that round? So many of the hopefuls were trying too hard, Randy explains. Even though the nervous guy wouldn't cough up a secret, "he felt genuine," Randy says. That was true of Tequila, too. "We liked her energy, and how open and honest she was about her cooking style and herself." Whether the two picks have the cooking chops to make the final grade would be determined later in the selection process.

20,000 wanna-bes

Folks at that granddaddy of reality shows, *The Real World*, can be even choosier. Each season, they vet some 20,000 applications from 20-somethings who want a shot at being on the show, about the same number of people who apply to Harvard University every year.

"One of the most important things is finding someone who is charismatic — who you want to be with, who has a strong point of view. Someone who will tell you things that some people might consider private," says Sasha Alpert, vice president of casting at Bunim/Murray Productions, which produces the show for MTV. (And yes, she swears they look at every single videotape that comes in.)

Some people just stumble into a chance at being on a reality show. That was certainly the case for two people who visited a drab little house tucked behind another drab little house in the Long Island community of East Rockaway last May.

Home buyers George and Corina Amiotis were there for an episode for HGTV's new series *Hidden Potential*, which is debuting in October. That day, they oooh and ahhh as the series' designer/architect Barry Wood and host Peggy Bunker discuss

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how the show could turn the Long Island house into a real gem — if the couple can cough up about \$150,000 in renovations.

Corina says she wasn't really looking to be in a TV series. Her mother saw a classified ad announcing that HGTV was looking for people in hot pursuit of new homes, and she convinced Corina to contact the network. After some initial investigation, "We knew it wasn't a scam. It wasn't goof TV," Corina recalls.

Why were the Arniotises chosen for the episode? First, they met a major requirement for the show: They really needed a new home, says Nicole Sorrenti, the show's producer. What's more, "They're young; they're energetic; they're comfortable on camera."

But being sunny and energetic isn't the whole story. For its new reality show *The Monastery*, TLC, placed five women in a state of nun-like seclusion at an abbey in Iowa and five men in the Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico. The participants — who included a wounded Iraq veteran, a recovering drug addict and a teen mom who went on to earn an MBA — were unplugged from modern life in order to explore their own spiritual crossroads.

For this remake of a British show, producer Sara Woodford didn't want candidates who wanted to be the next Jack Black. "I deliberately avoided people who think of themselves as having a talent — or who want to entertain people," she says. The team reached out to traditional casting directors and "blanket-dropped" word of



SILENT TREATMENT: For its series *The Monastery*, TLC sequestered five men of varied faiths and backgrounds in a New Mexico monastery to explore their own spiritual crossroads.

the call-for-candidates in newspapers and web sites. In the end, they interviewed about 500 candidates.

"We were looking for depth, without alienating or manipulating people," Woodford explains.

That's certainly a far cry from the characteristics that, say *The Surreal Life* producers are looking for.

And yet, there's a certain commonality among many of reality show casting. It seems to all come down to what attracted the *Top Chef* casting producers to Bullet Head and Tequila in the first place.

"A lot of people think they should present a person we want to see," says Randy Bernstein. "But that's not what we want. We want them."

THE RIGHT PSYCHIC STUFF

A Court TV producer turned to the cops to find crime-busting seers

How do you suss out a psychic? That has been the preoccupation of Robyn Hutt, who's had a major hand in finding stars for two Court TV shows that tap into the great unknown to solve crimes, *Psychic Detectives* and *Haunting Evidence*.

Hutt, who is senior vice president of current programming and specials at the network, isn't the ethereal type. And her level-headed approach has probably been a real good thing. Her crews were spooked several times when filming *Haunting Evidence* earlier this year.

The program, which stars medium John Oliver, psychic profiler Carla Baron and paranormal investigator Patrick Burns, focuses on murders that have never been solved. "There have been several times when the crew that's filming is completely terrified," Hutt says. "They have been standing in the woods at the scene of a murder and been completely freaked out. But we haven't had anyone quit yet."

Carla Baron's reputation as a medium has been building ever since she was a child. By the time she was a voice major at Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania, people started showing up at her door in numbers — and occasionally, a cop would elbow in on the last 20 minutes of a reading in hopes she could help him with a case.

Hutt seems to have managed to find psychics with the right stuff. During the making of both series, police have been startled on a few occasions when the TV psychics reveal something that law enforcement officials were trying to keep secret from the general public, she says. "They've asked us to turn off the cameras, and want to talk with the psychics privately."

Carla Baron,
Haunting Evidence



Photographer: Brent Stirton / Getty Images — Credit: TLC

LOOKING FOR REALITY TV STARDOM?

Scour classified ads online and in major city newspapers for casting calls.

Note the production companies producing shows you're most interested in and find their web sites. Sometimes (as is the case with *Real World* producer, Bunim/Murray, bunim-murray.com), casting-call information is provided.

Visit show and network web sites. They may provide casting call information, and also may give tips on what works and what doesn't when people audition.

Play to your own talents and strengths.

Candid responses and frank opinions can work to your advantage in an interview or audition. Be yourself!