

'Top Chef' star has recipe for cuisine, charity

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Reilly Jaffray, 17, of Weston, wears a green beaded necklace designed by Padma Lakshmi, the host and judge on Bravo's Emmy Award-winning television show, "Top Chef." Creations from Lakshmi's jewelry collection were on display and available for purchase at the Ultimate Chef Showdown and a portion of the jewelry proceeds will go to Lakshmi's Endometriosis Foundation of America. Photo: Meg Barone

Renaissance woman [Padma Lakshmi](#) issued a challenge to five local chefs Thursday at Clarke Luxury Kitchen Showroom in South Norwalk to create a culinary masterpiece using a handful of ingredients, including one crunchy item for the Mitchells/Richards Ultimate Chef Showdown.

The result was not only a palate-pleasing battle but a financial windfall for a cause close to Lakshmi's heart: her own charitable organization. Lakshmi, an actress, model, author, jewelry designer, and host and judge on the wildly popular, Emmy Award-winning Bravo television series "Top Chef," is co-founder of the [Endometriosis Foundation of America](#). The non-profit organization works to raise awareness of the reproductive disorder, advocates for research, promotes early detection and effective treatments, and provides funding for women unable to afford the necessary corrective surgery.

Lakshmi shared her personal struggle with endometriosis and thanked the audience of 200 people for their support. Lakshmi said she expected the event to raise about \$20,000, which will cover the cost of surgery for two women. "You'll be saving the lives of two women," she told the crowd.

"We really cherish and value your support," she said. Lakshmi said she started EFA with her doctor, Tamer Seckin, who she credits with saving her life. "I had stage-four endometriosis. Endometriosis is an illness that affects a woman's gynecological system. It's one of the leading causes of infertility in women, and ten percent of all women have this illness," she said. Her condition went undiagnosed and misdiagnosed until she was 36 years old. "My quality of life would have been much, much different," had it been detected earlier said Lakshmi, who gave birth to a baby girl last February.

At the Ultimate Chef Showdown, Lakshmi did not ask any of the chefs to "Pack your knives and go," as she does each week at the conclusion of the elimination challenges on "Top Chef." This was a friendly rivalry that pitted five local chefs against each other. [Pedro Garzon](#) of Café Manolo in Westport; [Matt Storch](#) of Match in South Norwalk; [Robin Selden](#) of Marcia Selden Catering and Event Planning in Stamford; Matthew Schmalle of the [Capital Grille](#) in Stamford; and [Christian Petroni](#) of Barcelona in Greenwich used shrimp, hot peppers, something green, a citrus item, and something crunchy to showcase their skills.

Spectators walked from kitchen to kitchen watching each chef create their plates for judging and sampling other menu items made by each chef.

Lakshmi named Petroni the winner and Selden, the only woman and the only caterer in the competition, was the runner up. Both identified themselves as "self-taught chefs." "It's nice to see people appreciate simple food," said Petroni, who has twice won on the [Food Network](#) show "Chopped." His winning dish Thursday included shrimp aioli, romaine lettuce, crispy jamon -- a dry-cured Spanish ham, lemon zest and a slice of hard-boiled egg.

Selden's dish was butter-poached shrimp with rice pearls, toasted sesame seeds and ginger caviar. Storch, who grew up in Westport, made risotto in a miniature pumpkin with a dollop of crème fraiche as one of his non-competition dishes. Garzon prepared a citrus-marinated shrimp with house-made Barbados-style hot sauce and mango salsa.

Garzon said he was pleased to be included in the competition. "It's a great cause. This is different from your normal event. It's competition but it's fun, and this is a great, great facility," he said of Clarke's.

"It was great fun to sample their normal fare as well as challenge them to think outside the box," said [Andrew Mitchell-Namdar](#), vice president of marketing and creative services for Mitchells, and a judge at the event.

Food was not the only thing on the "menu" Thursday. Also showcased was Lakshmi's jewelry, which was available for purchase with a portion of those proceeds also going to her foundation.

"For us, fashion is fun, food is fun. This event is a great marriage of the two," said Mitchell-Namdar. He said Lakshmi's jewelry collection is available at Mitchells family of stores.

[Gerry Bush-Jaffray](#), of Weston, purchased a striking green, beaded necklace for her daughter [Reilly Jaffray](#), 17. "My daughter is a big fan of the cooking show and she thinks Padma is fabulous," she said.

Lakshmi said her jewelry designs are influenced by archaeology, art and cultures throughout the world. Recent inspiration has come from Afghani art and the Masai, nomadic people of eastern African "My design esthetic comes from a more intellectual place," she said.

Despite her sophisticated palate and extensive knowledge of foods from myriad cultures around the world -- she speaks five languages, Lakshmi admitted she is never as happy as when she is sitting by a fireplace eating a bowl of noodles.