



Photo: Patrick McMullan

Simmons Previews *Top Chef*; Waxman Defends Gael Greene

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"The characters are really interesting this year," Gail Simmons told us last night about the new season of *Top Chef*.

"They're just a really interesting, smart group of talented young cooks. Really cool strong women, which is great to see." The judge, whom we spoke with at the Chefs' Tribute to James Beard, a Citymeals-on-Wheels benefit at Rockefeller Center, was

more forthcoming about her dining experiences in our nation's capital than she was with details about the cheftestants. Between takes, she squeezed in as many meals as she could, eating "really well" at such hot spots as Cork, CityZen, Sou'Wester, Palena, Komi ("which was just beautiful"), and Jose Andres's restaurants Oyamel, Jaleo, and Zaytinya, where former *Top Chef* contestant Mike Isabella is executive chef.

We spotted former *Top Chef Masters* contestant Jonathan Waxman minding a crispy soft-shell-crab dish with shaved spring vegetable, lemon vinaigrette, and crab aioli and asked him about the [Obi-Wan moniker](#) he picked up from his peers last season. "Well listen, it's a little embarrassing, but I'll take it," said the chef. "I didn't know anything about it. No one said it in front of me. And all of a sudden, somebody called me Obi-Wan, just whispered it, and I said, 'Who are you talking to?' It's very touching, actually."

Waxman was less sentimental when we raised the possibility of Gael Greene judging him unfairly on *Top Chef Masters*, since he was playing for the charity she founded. "I think that she has more integrity than anybody that I know, No. 1; No. 2 is that she's always a critic," Waxman countered. "When she puts her critic's hat on, she's a critic and she doesn't care whether you slept with her the night before. It's not going to affect her one iota."