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## **Hosting "Top Chef: Chicago" is not a picnic:**

*Five questions lakshmi's iron stomach can handle liver gnocchi, "mystery meat"*

She has a dangerous job. While nibbling, slurping and taste-testing on "Top Chef," Padma Lakshmi puts her taste buds on the line. "There are times when I even wonder what the mystery meat is," says the TV beauty and host of the hit reality series, which is set in Chicago this season.

You think it's easy to down all that food? "We had a pizza challenge and it was surprisingly one of the most difficult Quickfires [challenges] I've had to get through on the show, because of the sheer volume of food that I had to ingest," says Lakshmi -- who still managed to leave room for a few questions.

### **1. How has the show changed since moving to Chicago this season?**

I think it's definitely a new show since the move to Chicago. The thing about "Top Chef" is that every new locale informs the competition. And I think that's one of the reasons we like to move it around. As for Chicago, it's a great food town. It has many regional traditions. And I love it. I cannot believe that I got well into my 30s and never came to Chicago. Now I'm here and I've found the people warm and the restaurants fantastic.

### **2. What have been the worst and best concoctions you've ever had to try on "Top Chef"?**

The worst thing I ate was the chocolate gnocchi with a morsel of liver in it. And ironically, probably one of the best dishes I ate was from the same chef who won and it was the fideo with chorizo and clams in that same episode -- same episode, same chef.

### **3. What are the biggest mistakes new chefs make on the show?**

The better the chef the less ingredients they actually use, because they know what flavors they want. They know how to achieve that and the flavors are strong and clear, and come through, and aren't muddled. Also a lot of cooking is spontaneous. At least I'm a very spontaneous cook. And sometimes where I end up is not where I thought I wanted to when I started out, which is a good thing.

### **4. How has this show touched the masses? Are people trying these recipes at home?**

I have people all the time who come up to me on the street and say, 'Well, you know, I made this dessert yesterday for my husband.' I feel kind of tickled at the thought that we're actually educating the TV viewer across the nation about these culinary terms and what it means to do a chiffonade versus, you know, a julienne or whatever. ... Also, now people come up to me and they want me to say "pack your knives and go" to them, which I don't do as a matter of principle.

**5. What one dish do you think says the most about a chef? Some people say it's making the perfect egg. Some people say it's the best grilled cheese. What do you think?**

I don't think grilled cheese is that difficult to make, nor do I think eggs are very difficult to make. But I do think the way you make eggs in the morning shows a lot about your technical skills. I can actually tell a lot about a chef right off the bat from the first Quickfire when I walk around their stations. Are they messy? What are their knife skills like? How many dishes do they use up? All of that, because what happens if you get experiences, all that gets whittled down. It all gets edited down and streamlined. And I can tell a lot about the messiness of a chef. I'm not into messy stations at all.