

BATTLE ROYALE

Getting to know two of Boulder's hottest cooks

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One night last week, Hosea

Rosenberg, head chef at Boulder's Jax Fish House, laughed and held up a rotten piece of squash that he'd pulled out of my refrigerator.

"Don't worry," he says. "All I have in my fridge is beer."

Later that week Corey Buck, owner and head chef at John's Restaurant, paused while pan-frying a piece of tenderloin at the restaurant's kitchen, and considered what he would order as his hypothetical last meal.

"An In-N-Out burger," he says. "And a Cuban cigar."

Buck, 30, and Rosenberg, 31, are riding the growing buzz around the Boulder restaurant scene. They each work 12-hour days, they each change their menus constantly and they each oversee every plate that leaves their award-winning kitchens.

On Aug. 25, the two square off at this summer's third installment of the Flatiron Chef Competition, a localized version of the Food Network's popular cooking program "Iron Chef," complete with a one-hour time limit and a secret ingredient.

But before they roll up their tell-tale white chef sleeves to compete, I wanted to get to know the men behind the food. And while I thought that chefs are red-faced and angry in the kitchen — and uber-foodie snobs during their time off — these two proved me dead wrong.

THE CONTENDER: HOSEA ROSENBERG

Rosenberg works long shifts at jam-packed Jax, 928 Pearl St., which is known for its flown-in-fresh-daily fish menu.

Now, I love fish, but I buy my salmon at Safeway, where it's about four bucks a package. I also cook it on the George Foreman grill, because I don't actually know how to use a pan and a stovetop.

So I invited Rosenberg over to my tiny, neglected kitchen to see what he could make out of ingredients that were a little less... gourmet... than those at Jax. In place of fresh veggies, I have on-sale, pinkish tomatoes from the grocery store. My salmon had "color added," according to the packaging.

"This probably wasn't good when you bought it," Rosenberg said, looking at the rosy fish. "They've had it longer than you want to know."

» **Lesson one:** When buying salmon,

take a look at the package. If it says Atlantic farm-raised, you're probably getting an unhealthy fish that was raised in a tiny area where it wasn't allowed to swim enough. The "color added" is pellets of ground-up shrimp cells that are fed to the fish to make them appear healthier. They won't have as much flavor as wild salmon, and may have been exposed to toxins.

"It's still better than McDonalds," Rosenberg added helpfully, but says to look for the word "wild" on the package in the future for tastier fish.

» **Lesson two:** When buying salmon, talk to the workers behind the counter. You can ask them to open the package and smell the fish — if it smells fishy, don't buy it. It should smell like salt water or the ocean.

"You also pretty much got the worst cut of meat possible," Rosenberg said, shaking his head at the package.

» **Lesson three:** Never get the tail end of the salmon; it has more sinew and connective tissue. You're also paying for a lot of skin near the tail. Always ask for a center or collar cut; it's

more thick and juicy.

Despite my inferior choice of cuts, Rosenberg opened up the package and laid the meat out on a plate, dousing it in olive oil, soy sauce, salt and pepper.

» **Lesson four:** Setting the meat out just a bit ahead of time and adding salt and pepper can tenderize it — a perfect quick-fix for those of us too lazy to marinate.

While the meat tenderized, Rosenberg poured canola oil in a pan and warmed it. He says that he uses canola to cook because it has a lower smoke point, meaning it doesn't get as hot as fast as olive oil does. He also likes to cook with it because it doesn't add any flavors to your dish.

I put water in a big pot and set it to boil so we could blanch the asparagus. Putting the pot on to boil, it should be noted, was the only way I actually helped with this meal. And I had to ask what the word "blanch" meant — turns out it's a way of cooking veggies quickly by dunking them in boiling water.

» **Lesson five:** Season the water first before you blanch — it adds flavor to the asparagus. Without the seasoning it might lose some color and become gray or brown.

While the salmon cooked, Rosenberg pulled out an avocado, mushrooms and tomatoes.

"Do you have a cutting board?" he asked innocently.

My cutting board, which was only \$3 at Target, is melted and malformed because I left it too close to the oven. Rosenberg shook his head.

"And a knife?"

I pulled one of my cheap, serrated steak knives out of the drawer.

» **Lesson six:** Among some of the start-up gear you need for a truly functional kitchen is a good knife and cutting board. Rosenberg recommended that you get a chef's knife and a large serrated knife to cut bread and tomatoes.

He suggested saving some dough by going to knifemerchant.com, which sometimes will list utensils up to 50 percent off of what you'd find in a store. He also recommended getting a few "decent" pots and pans, including a non-stick pan and a non-non-stick pan.

He made short work of the veggies, with only a few pointed comments that veggie-cubing would be much easier with "a real knife."

"All right, do you have some garlic?" he asked, piling the vegetables and readying them for the pan.

I pointed to the shelf above my sink, where I have lined up those small, overpriced grinders of garlic pepper and "Italian seasonings."

"Oh, those all smell like cardboard to me," he said, physically separating the grinders by pushing them to the side of the shelf.

» **Lesson seven:** Grow your own spices if you have a good kitchen window. although I shy away from such domestic activities, Rosenberg promises



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