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Kristen Kish Dishes on the ‘Iron Chef’ Reboot, Food Culture, and Travel

June 6, 2022 Kwin Mosby

Chef Kristen Kish has been out and proud enjoying her time in the limelight since her big winning the 10th season of *Top Chef*. Since then, she’s expanded her culinary empire to include penning her book, “Kristen Kish Cooking: Recipes and Techniques: A Cookbook,” and opening her restaurant, Arlo Grey by Kristen Kish, in Austin, Texas. And after a couple of TV hosting gigs, Kish is most excited about her newest project, co-hosting *Iron Chef: Quest for the Iron Legend* on Netflix, scheduled to premiere on June 15, 2022.

Kish will co-host the reboot TV show with Alston Brown and “The Chairman,” Mark Dacascos, who will take viewers on a high-octane culinary competition between five new trailblazing Iron Chefs – including Curtis Stone, Dominque Crenn, and Marcus Samuelsson – will face off with brave Challenger Chefs in the reimagined Kitchen Stadium. The most successful Challenger will return to battle in a grand finale for the chance to be named the first-ever “Iron Legend.”

In addition to talking to Kish about her new hosting duties, I also wanted to dive into her food journey and find out what was the impetus for her to hone her expert culinary skills. Of course, we chat about travel, including her favorite food city and what drives her passion to travel. And she also reveals how being a queer Korean American woman impacts how she travels, but also created a few obstacles on her road to success.

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Iron Chef: Quest for the Iron Legend (Photo Credit: Netflix)

Vacationer Magazine: How did your role as one of the hosts for the new Netflix series, *Iron Chef: Quest for an Iron Legend* happen?

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Kristen Kish: It was very surprising and random in a lot of ways. A lot of TV projects start years in advance sometimes, but a minimum of a year. My manager called to say, "Hey, we have this opportunity on *Iron Chef*." I said, "Ok, first of all, I'm going to stop right there. I'm not cooking and I'm over competitive cooking." Not because of any other reason except my anxiety can't handle it anymore. So, I got on a Zoom phone call with Eytan Keller and Daniel Calin (the show's executive producers) and they asked me where I saw myself fitting into this new remake. I said either judging or hosting, but just not cooking. And they said, "got it."

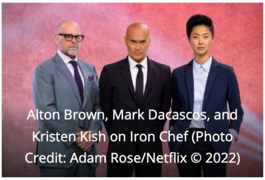
I remember Eytan Keller saying that they remembered me being in Kitchen Stadium and that the show looked like I belong, in some way, here. So, I think that was it. I don't know about the discussions that happened behind the scenes, but from my perspective, it happened in a few weeks.

Briefly, can you tell us what viewers can expect from this show? How is this show different from other cooking or culinary shows?

I think the beauty of the remake is that it has the essence of the original. It's technically one-on-one battles with a few challenges tucked away in the middle, but it hasn't departed very far from the original, and why people like to watch *Iron Chef*.

The storyline is the most interesting part of all of this. We follow the storyline of the chefs. It's more about telling the story of who they are, where they come from, and where their point of view lies in food. It's not just strictly cooking – it's about cooking and the person. Because for a very long time, and I've always said it – to know someone's food you have to know who they are. So, I think we're leaning into the personalities of who these people are and why they cook the way they cook.

Alston Brown and Kristen Kish (Photo Credit: Patrick Wymore/Netflix © 2022)


Alton Brown, Mark Dacascos, and Kristen Kish on Iron Chef (Photo Credit: Adam Rose/Netflix © 2022)

Alston Brown and Kristen Kish (Photo Credit: Patrick Wymore/Netflix © 2022)

Are there any memorable or "wow" moments you can tell us about without giving away too much?

I had many. The fact that I get to watch and eat the Iron Chefs' food – all five of them. So to be able to just have this bird's-eye view of being able to watch these culinary people that I'd followed since I was young as they tried to understand and figure out their careers was a point of inspiration for my young self. It was like a full-circle professional moment.

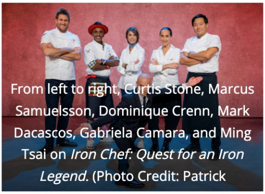
I get wowed by food semi-regularly, but from what I saw – the level of cooking, the storytelling of the cooking – is what fascinates me the most.

And of course, the fact that I get to stand next to Alton Brown, who I absolutely adore. I knew we were going to be fine, but I came out of this experience with an incredible, incredible friend. He was a huge reason why I was able to succeed in this role.

What inspired you to become a chef?

I came out after *Top Chef*. I got my start in this culinary field in a public sense of the word obviously because of *Top Chef* and putting myself out there. But at 5 years old, I was watching *Great Chefs of the World* on Discovery Channel and I was completely enamored by the cooking. It was very low budget: a camera, a chef, and probably a boom mic or not. But I was fascinated by how people made things. And so that kind of kicked off this obsession and idea that I really loved cooking.

Co-host Kristen Kish and Challenger chef Mason Hereford on *Iron Chef: Quest for an Iron Legend*. (Photo Credit: Adam Rose/Netflix © 2022)



From left to right, Curtis Stone, Marcus Samuelsson, Dominique Crenn, Mark Dacascos, Gabriela Camara, and Ming Tsai on *Iron Chef: Quest for an Iron Legend*. (Photo Credit: Patrick

Challenger chef Claudette Zepeda (Photo Credit: Adam Rose/Netflix © 2022)

Curtis Stone, one of five Iron Chefs on *Iron Chef: Quest for the Iron Legend* (Photo Credit: Adam Rose/Netflix © 2022)

Judges and hosts from left to right, Nilou Motamed, Andrew Zimmern, Kristen Kish, Wolfgang Puck, Alton Brown (Photo Credit: Adam Rose/Netflix © 2022)

(Photo Credit: Courtesy of Netflix © 2022)

Describe your journey to becoming a chef as a queer woman of color. Did you experience obstacles? If so, what was your strategy to push through it all to get to the other side?

There are so many different avenues to how I get to be a professional chef, but for me, as a queer woman of color, I guess I didn't recognize it and realize it in a lot of ways. I was adopted, and for a lack of a better term, sometimes I forget that I'm Asian. If that makes any sense. I think a lot of adoptees can relate to that. And so I didn't go through all these jobs as this person constantly thinking I have this thing on my back, that says I'm Asian, clearly, I am, but I don't have it in the forefront of my mind.

I didn't have the simplest and easiest career, but I certainly didn't have the hardest. And the point that I felt the most unsupported – and whether that was because I was gay or whether that was because of TV or whether that was because of my race – I don't know, and I will never know unless you ask someone because no one blatantly ever told me they had an issue with my sexuality or my race. I can guess and I can assume, and I can read between the lines, but I was in a very fortunate situation where I could walk away from that job and still be ok. So the moment I did feel that way in that environment, I was able to remove myself from that environment because I couldn't do it anymore. And I had the full support of my boss at the time. He said, "You know what, go! You don't need any of this, just go ahead and spread your wings, and do what you got to do."

It's so interesting. I heard a rumor rumbling about my sexuality, and I was like "God, guys are assholes." But I never confronted it. Now in my adult self and being who I am now, I certainly say, "What the fuck are you talking about? Let's talk this through if you're going to talk behind my back." I can't go back to the younger self who didn't have the confidence to say that, but all I can do is be more aware of it now.

Kristen Kish on *Iron Chef: Quest for the Iron Legend* (Photo Credit: Greg Gayne/Netflix © 2022)

Do you think it's important for queer women and or Asian-Americans to see people like yourself in leadership positions and or high visibility roles? If so, why?

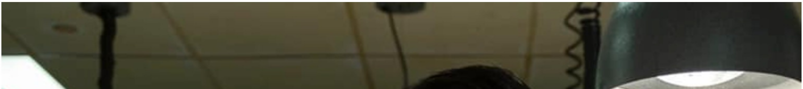
I used to not even think about it. I wasn't even in the spotlight. No one cared what I was doing. As my life became more public, I began to understand its importance. Like I said before growing up, I sometimes forget I'm Asian, so when I'm looking at TV, I'm not oftentimes asking questions like, "Why don't I see someone who looks like me?" Because I had a different experience with learning that I am Asian.

And yes, absolutely, it's something I'm more aware of now than I ever have been in my life. And now that I am more aware of who I am and putting that out there for other people, I'm more aware of who other people are and what they represent as well.

Are there specific types of cuisine that you enjoy preparing?

So, a lot of chefs these days, we're leaning heavily in wanting to tell the story of who we are and our background. And who I am is a kid that grew up in the Midwest with Midwestern classic fare of Hamburger Helper, meatloaf, semi-overcooked steaks, tons of casseroles – and so that's my food journey. So, therefore, I like to take that inspiration and play with it about nostalgia, comfort, and what it means to connect with people through that kind of food.

Because regardless of where I grew up or where you grew up, I'm sure we all have some form of a casserole or a one-pot soup dish that we all remember from our childhood. Or even a boxed meal that can kind of translate over a lot of different backgrounds and how we grew up. So, I like to play with those things because ultimately, it makes me happy and confident being able to lean into those flavors.



(Photo Credit: Natalie Engel)

You're well-traveled. What's one place you'd enjoy visiting again?

I will say Barcelona. I crave to go back. Yes, it's Barcelona and the food is outstanding like the tasting menus that I had were great. But the thing about Barcelona is that I met this woman. Her name is Helena. She has this little restaurant in central Barcelona. But I found her as a human to be inspiring and kind and just one of those people you want to see again.

There was something about it [Barcelona] I will never forget. At her café, I had Iberico pork neck, and it was just sliced and served over roasted peppers that were thinly sliced and maybe a little bit of parsley. It was just so damn good! And I was like this woman has something to say, she knows exactly who she is, this is the food she wants to cook, and she's doing it. So, those are the type of people I crave to see again.

Please tell us how you identify yourself on the LGBTQIA spectrum. Tell us if how you identify influences the way you travel. If so, how?

Well, I am very gay. I've known it for a very long time. No question. It used to not influence the way I travel because I think I was so unaware. I also think I came out when I was in my late 20s. So, my travel started to ramp up professionally in my 30s, so I guess I didn't have to think about it for a long time because I wasn't out, and I wasn't traveling.

Now, I understand that there are so many places in this world that do not accept me. I have to think about those things often – smartly and intelligently – like flying through cities in which homosexuality is still illegal. I have to think about it. I don't know how to look less gay, and I don't know exactly what that means? It's all absurd to me, however, it is the reality that we do face.

So, I do my own research lightly because I think I have to. It has also opened my eyes up to seeking out queer-owned businesses and restaurants and trying to find these places. And so for me, I feel like that is something that I do now as a traveler because I have a responsibility to seek those out not only for myself but to also share what I learned.

(Photo Credit: Natalie Engel)

Let's move on to some fun travel questions. So, you're heading on a trip. What's the one thing you never forget to pack?

Nail clippers because I hate when my nails get long. Teeth whitener and my hat.

You're going on a road trip. What singer or band is always on your playlist?

Van Morrison. I remember my dad and I would open up all the windows in the house in the summer, usually on a chore day or something, and there was Van Morrison going through the house. It just carries a lot of good memories for me. So, whenever I need that happy, chill cadence – Van Morrison is always it.

(Photo Credit: Natalie Engel)

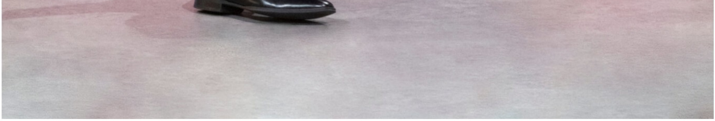
What has been the most interesting item of food you've tasted?

When I was in Istanbul, I had a combination – it took me a while to wrap my brain around it – it was this melted white cheese, and it was chilled (sort of) and it had shredded chicken breast in it and chocolate on it. It didn't taste bad, but I was trying to get it all to come together for my particular palate. It's a well-known combination or dish, but that was definitely interesting. I'd eat it again though.

You're planning a fun getaway. Which one of your castmates are you more inclined to ask to tag along on your journey… Alton Brown or Mark Dacascos? Why?

I just met the two of them so I'm going to say both of them. I mean Alton Brown is one of the most glorious humans and one of the greatest things that came out of the project for me – being able to call him a friend. I can't say enough amazing things about the man. I just want to hang out with him more.

And Mark is so chill and a badass! I also knew Mark as "The Chairman" on *Iron Chef America*. He's also an incredible actor, martial artist, and all these amazing things. He has an energy that is incredibly Zen and calm. And I feel like whenever you travel you need people around you that have that kind of energy.



From left to right, Alton Brown, Mark Dacascos, and Kristen Kish (Photo Credit: Adam Rose/Netflix © 2022)

Favorite food city?

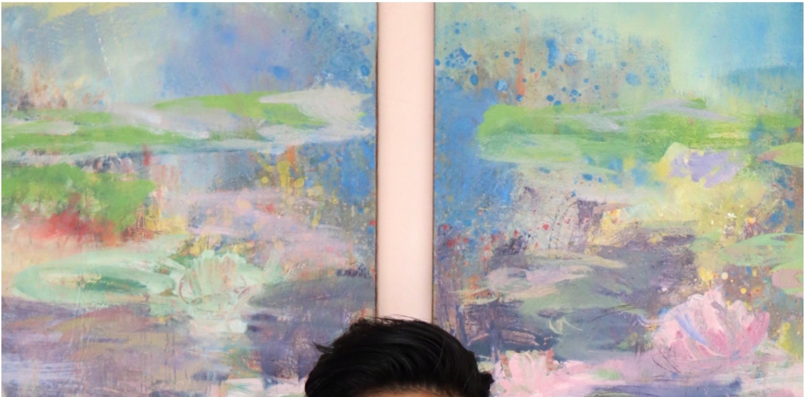
The fact that I have New York City in my backyard is pretty damn cool. You really can't compete with what you want when you want it at your fingertips without even getting on an airplane.

Favorite restaurant?

Anywhere my friends are cooking

Travel itinerary or go with the flow?

Oh, go with the flow. You gotta let one thing lead you to the next and the next. From my point of view, if you go in with a plan, you kind of miss all the exterior stuff that spontaneity can bring. So, maybe somewhere right in the middle. So, maybe you have the main points you want to hit – like your favorite queer-owned businesses – and then from there, you let those places influence where you go next and let the people you meet help you out.



(Photo Credit: Natalie Engel)

Travel internationally or domestically?

It is no surprise that international travel takes a lot of time, money, and effort. So, I will say that I love traveling domestically because I think there are parts of this country that are stunning. I love the Wyoming and Montana area. They're two of the most beautiful places on Earth.

Island resort or 5-star hotel?

If it's with my wife… how about a 5-star hotel on an island?

Go somewhere new or somewhere you've been before?

Somewhere new

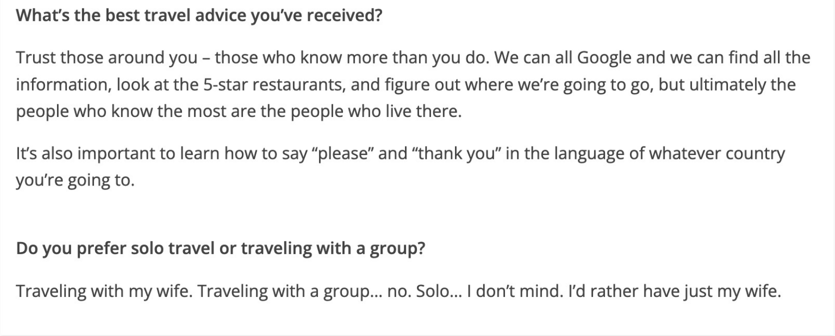
Describe your travel personality in three words.

Horrible at directions.

(Photo Credit: @KristenKish on Facebook)

Would you rather see a lot of places or get to know one really well?

I would rather see a lot of places. Life is short and I gotta get out there and see as much as I can.



What’s the best travel advice you’ve received?

Trust those around you – those who know more than you do. We can all Google and we can find all the information, look at the 5-star restaurants, and figure out where we’re going to go, but ultimately the people who know the most are the people who live there.

It’s also important to learn how to say “please” and “thank you” in the language of whatever country you’re going to.

Do you prefer solo travel or traveling with a group?

Traveling with my wife. Traveling with a group… no. Solo… I don’t mind. I’d rather have just my wife.