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# CORBIN IN THE KITCHEN

Corbin Tomaszeski has the kind of laugh that might alarm you if you were sitting next to him in a dark movie theatre: it doesn't build, it just leaves his mouth in one hearty, loud "HA!" In conversation, however, the shock is mitigated by his friendly smile and his handsome, slightly goofy, boy-next-door quality.

If you've seen him on the Food Network reality show *Restaurant Makeover*, in which he and a rotating collection of chefs help devise new menus for struggling restaurants, you probably remember him as the jovial, easy-going one. And sure enough, the persona is no act. "The guy I play on *Restaurant Makeover* - that is the guy I am in real life," Tomaszeski says.

We are sitting in the swank surroundings of Holts Café, the 80-seat restaurant he operates inside the flagship Holt Renfrew store in Toronto's tony Yorkville neighborhood. The café - a gleaming, white-tiled oasis tucked behind the ladies' lingerie department - is populated almost exclusively by couture-clad women carrying overflowing shopping bags. You get the distinct impression some of them are here for the cute 35-year-old chef as much as for the food.



As Tomaszeski explains, this is not the kind of cooking environment he imagined for himself at the outset of his career, but he's come to embrace it. "I truly do love what I do."

Raised on a cattle farm near the tiny village of Warburg, Alberta, Tomaszeski fell into the culinary arts at an early age. "I remember being in the kitchen when I was just a little kid, watching my older sister and my mother cook," he says. "I was barely the height of the stove and I'd be on my tiptoes looking to see what was going into the pots and pans."

When he got a bit older, his mother capitalized on his keen interest and delegated some of the cooking chores to him. "I just took over a little bit of the kitchen duties here, a little bit there, until eventually I could do it all myself."

At 17, Tomaszeski enrolled in NAIT's School of Hospitality, graduating top of his class in 1992. He did a few years of journeyman work, then a chef friend suggested he take over his position as executive chef at the Holt Renfrew restaurant in Edmonton.

"My immediate response was 'No way!'" laughs Tomaszeski. "I didn't want to cook quiche for ladies who lunch, and the only experience I'd ever had with Holt Renfrew was with a sales associate who tried to spray me with something from the perfume counter."

## "I HAD NO INTENTION OF BEING ON TV."<sup>11</sup>

After submitting to an interview, however, he realized a position as head chef - at the still-tender age of 24 - was too good to pass up. He also began to see that Holt Renfrew was more than sales clerks - that it was, as he insists now, the place to go for world-class fare.

Little did he know that he was about to embark on the culinary experience of a lifetime, that he and his team would not only prove that food is fashionable, but would create gorgeous food and special events for some of the world's most influential and high-profile people, including top designers and celebrities.

In the end, management narrowed it down to him and one other candidate. To decide the matter they came up with a cook-off. "Which is not how these things are usually decided," he laughs. Tomaszeski never found out what the other guy cooked, but it was clearly no match for the tandoori chicken dish he prepared. He won the contest and began what turned out to be a three-year kitchen stint.

In 2000, Tomaszeski was asked to move to Toronto - a place he'd had no intention of living - to revitalize the food and beverage operations of the Holt Renfrew flagship store. Upon arriving, he was teamed with a merchant in the store's gift and gourmet business and told to come up with a concept for the then-mouldering rooftop restaurant. "Our original idea was to turn it into a 190-seat dining room - a five-star, gourmet place. But they came

back and said, 'No, that's ridiculous, it'll never fly!'"

Which is when Tomaszeski went back to the drawing board and hit on something much simpler and possibly even more buzz-worthy: the tartine. Tartines, by definition, are merely French-style open-faced sandwiches - or, as Tomaszeski puts it, "bread with spread." But as he saw it, they had two major sources of appeal to Holt Renfrew customers: nobody in North America was doing them, and they would be made, in this case, with the reigning king of breads: Poilâne.

"I knew of Poilâne bread from my visits to Vancouver, when I'd go to a food market called Urban Fare," explains Tomaszeski. "They used to fly it in from France and they'd call it the \$100 loaf."

A heavy sourdough bread with a thick golden crust, Poilâne is made exclusively in Paris and then couriered to psychotically dedicated carbohydrate lovers around the world. Though it doesn't actually cost \$100, it is expensive: Tomaszeski buys it in bulk for about \$24 a loaf, but a single loaf can set you back \$40 or more. "Sometimes people ask why we don't just use bread from the local bakery down the street," says Tomaszeski. "But it's not about that. It's about setting us apart from everybody else."

After the sandwiches became a hit with customers, Tomaszeski became known as "that tartine guy," and he was eventually tapped to appear on the Food Network's *Crash My Kitchen*, a reality show in which he invaded people's homes and showed them how to improve their terrible cooking habits.

"I really had no intention of ever being on television," he says. "But the producer of the show was a regular customer and she called and asked me to audition."

Tomaszeski still remembers walking into the casting agency: "I'd just left work, so I'm in my white chef's jacket looking totally dorky - like, 'Hi, I'm Mr. Chef!' - and there are all these starving actors there, and I'm thinking 'I so do not belong here...'"

Though *Crash My Kitchen* lasted only one season, Tomaszeski was subsequently asked to join the cast of *Restaurant Makeover*, a much better fit. "On *Crash My Kitchen*, I was still new to TV and I think I was trying to be what other people wanted me to be," he says. "But on *Restaurant Makeover* I get to be myself - sarcastic, fun, passionate."

By the end of our interview, Holt Renfrew is closing for the day, and Tomaszeski gathers up his things and walks me to the door. Heading down the escalator, I ask him about the slight controversy that has always dogged *Restaurant Makeover*: the fact that so many of the restaurant owners complain afterwards about the "improvements."

"Um, yeah, I dunno, I think maybe it's the (interior) designers that they have the problem with," he says. Then he throws back his head and laughs: "All I know is: they never complain about Corbin in the kitchen!" ■