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The Road to the Beards: Gabrielle Hamilton

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The road to the [James Beard Awards](#) (widely dubbed the Oscars of food) is different for all of us. For the Feed, it's about slipping into a frock and readying our live-blogging software. For the nominated chefs, it's about preparing some bons mots in case of a victory. And for seven-time nominee, zero-time winner chef Terrance Brennan, it's about nailing the gracious "It's an honor just to be nominated" routine.

For you, though, it's about checking this space over the next two weeks leading up to the May 4 gala. We'll be gabbing with the toques-in-the-running for one of the more exciting distinctions: Best Chef NYC.

First up: Gabrielle Hamilton of [Prune](#).

Where were you when you found out about the nomination and what did you tell your staff when you broke the news?

I was doing a prep shift in the restaurant, and I said to the people in the office, "What the fuck is going on? I've got, like, a million e-mails in my inbox!" Catherine googled it and was like, "You've been nominated for a James Beard." She put up a big sign in the restaurant, so I didn't actually tell the staff.

What does your nomination as the only woman in the Best Chef NYC category mean for you, personally and professionally?

It means it fucks things up, and undermines all the potential joy of the nomination. In a way, I tend not to spin out on that stuff. I can't help but think they needed to pick a girl, and of the girls, I'm pretty good. I could go down that path for hours, but I'm not going to. I'll just say that I'm honored.

Is there one dish in particular that you created (and perfected) over the last year that you are particularly proud of?

I'm obsessed with this thing I started to make—homemade silken tofu with fresh soy beans and lots of French butter—and I'm kind of in love with it for a million reasons. Anyone who knows me knows I'm the last person who would be making tofu. I like that it's contrary to the pork craze. Pork is hot, but isn't it great to be eating something else? It's custardy. I start by making fresh soy milk.

You've been turning tables furiously at Prune for ten years; did this year's James Beard Best Chef NYC nomination come as a surprise?

Oddly, it's only now that I could actually believe it. Do you think that's strange? I have mixed feelings about the Beard awards. I'm self-taught; I never went to school to become a chef. Ten years into it at my own place, I understand the whole project—I know how to manage my people, how to make sure the plates are clean, to make sure everyone on the line is salting the dish in the same way. Now it's, like, possible. Ten years ago I would never have believed it.

What is the relevance of a Beard Award these days?

Well, when you don't get invited, it's "just a big stupid party," but when you do get invited, it's "this incredible party!" And it's a truly great honor.

And how do you feel about the competition for Best Chef NYC?

I don't feel nervous at all. We're not expecting to win. If you look at who else is in the category, it's ridiculous. I think Wylie [Dufresne, WD50] should win for what he does—he's the best at it. But I don't feel nervous at all. It's improbable. But sure, who doesn't want to put on a dress, get your hair done, go in a town car? It's like going to prom.

What will you be wearing to the awards? The ceremony is, after all, the Oscars of the food world.

You're just like my female staff at Prune! The minute they found out, they were like, "What will you wear?" I don't know—it's supposed to be long, right? It says evening attire. I know how to clean up, so I'll clean up just fine. We're decidedly not Hollywood types, we're not trained for this sort of thing. We spend a lot of time eating pork. To see us with burn marks on our arms in these fancy clothes... We'll figure it out.

Of the sleazy food TV personalities—and there are many—who would you award a Beard to if forced?

I don't watch that crap. The only person I have seen is Mario, and I haven't seen the latest thing he's done with Gwyneth. To me that guy is super legit—anything he does, I always think he's right on.

Do you have a favorite season at Prune?

I don't like spring, as a contrarian. Some of the transition seasons are harder. It's like dress rehearsal for summer. The first crops are wobbly; they don't hold their lines or make the mark. Once full summer hits, that's pretty exuberant. I love that last intense burst of September. You have a full range and the market is packed—you have the light greens of early spring, and the deep purples of the stuff coming in that's traditional fall.

You are also a writer, and currently at work on a food narrative. In terms of creative process, how is it different when you're working on a piece and when you're creating a recipe?

They're totally different things. Maybe I'll ask, "Does this menu, in its whole, cover the arc of a story?" Loosely, but not really. Sometimes you have to read the menu and ask, "Does this read well?" In a small way, the process is shared.

If you have a night off, or you go out after Prune closes, where do you like to eat?

I love Chiyono on 6th [Street]. Her Japanese home cooking is crazy good. Isn't that funny? Every time I'm asked I'm like, "I don't know! The list is so long!" Lupa is an all-time fave.

Do you have a favorite new restaurant from 2008?

From 2008? I'm so behind on restaurants, I'm about on restaurants from 2006! Insieme—was that in '08 or '07? I don't go to a place until about eight people tell me to go there. It takes a long time for eight people to tell me to go to a restaurant from 2008.

If you win Best Chef NYC, what will you do to celebrate?

The same thing we're already doing—just going to the party for the fun of it. We might come back to Prune with a couple of very close friends and eat burgers. —*Interviewed by Jeanne Hodesh*

See all Road to the Beards interviews [here](#).

Tickets are still available to the May 4 James Beard Award gala. [Click here](#) for details.