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Mayor Emanuel Interviews “Top Chef” Joe Flamm and “MasterChef Junior” Beni Cwiakala on Chicago Stories Podcast

On this week’s episode of [Chicago Stories](#), Mayor Emanuel sat down with Chicago culinary champions Joe Flamm and Beni Cwiakala—both South Side natives—to learn about their signature dishes, their favorite restaurants, and what it’s like conquering cooking’s toughest arenas.

For both Beni and Joe, home and family is where it all started, and in Beni’s case, it started especially early.

“We always cooked together as a family,” said 11-year-old Beni, who lives in Pilsen. “Around three I just wanted to help out in the kitchen, so my parents were like ‘go for it,’ so I really just started cooking.”

It was no different for Joe, who grew up in Ashburn and Beverly. “We always cooked together,” Joe said. “Once you could reach the table you rolled the pasta. You just grew up with it.”

And just like Chicago itself, Beni and Joe’s family heritages also had a direct impact on their cooking, both in Beni’s Eastern-European-infused choices on “MasterChef Junior” and Joe’s big Irish-Italian family inspiring his feats with pasta on “Top Chef” and as executive chef at Spiaggia.

Winning in the country’s toughest cooking competitions was life-changing for both Beni and Joe.

“You try to mentally prepare yourself the whole time for ‘what if I lose,’” Joe said, “but you never prepare yourself for ‘what if I win.’”

In Joe’s case, winning immediately led to a surge in business at his Michelin-starred restaurant located in Chicago’s Gold Coast. “Literally we have gotten 100 percent busier,” Joe said, “it’s incredible.”

For Beni, her win set her on a career path. “That’s when I decided what I want to be when I grow up,” Beni said. “This is the beginning of my journey. I want to pursue this culinary career.”

When it comes to cooking, there’s no better place to do it than Chicago. As Joe told Beni, “as a young chef, you’re in the right spot.” Chicago’s culinary scene isn’t just outstanding, it’s also deeply loyal, like a family.

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“There’s definitely competition and collaboration, but the chefs here in Chicago look at it like family,” Joe said. “We can razz each other and give each other a hard time, but if you’re not from here, you can’t talk about us.”

All told, Joe had some career advice for Beni and other aspiring chefs: “Go work for great people and they’ll teach you how to make great food. That’s how you really learn as a chef.”

Be sure to tune in listen to the entire episode as the three of them talk about their favorite dishes, Chicago’s delicious (really!) onions, and cooking for good causes.

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