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Malarkey brings outspokenness to the table

By [Peter Rowe](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Brian Malarkey is well-represented in photos covering the windows of Searsucker, a Gaslamp Quarter restaurant set to open in July. The chef is teaming up with James Brennan of Stingaree.

Brace yourself. After almost a year without a restaurant, TV show or dishy feud, the Brian Malarkey blitzkrieg is storming back.

He's baking the world's largest Rice Krispie treat (10,314 pounds) on TLC's "Mega Bites," premiering June 7.

He's prepping Searsucker, the Gaslamp Quarter restaurant that he and nightclub impresario James Brennan plan to open in July.

He's taking on colleagues who, in his view, misrepresent their role in the current "farm-to-table" craze.

"I call B.S. on that," Malarkey said last week, driving to Specialty Produce, a San Diego purveyor that

supplies more than 400 restaurants. “I read about these chefs that are running out to the farms every morning, pulling carrots from the ground, down at the docks waiting for the fish.

“No, they’re not. No, they’re not. That’s a little bit of embellishment.”

Malarkey, 37, possesses world-class ego, talent to burn, charm to spare and a P.T. Barnum-like touch of the showman. But among chefs, these characteristics are as common as a toque. When you run a kitchen, you rule an empire with fire and sword, creating masterworks for a fickle audience. Malarkey is proud and a self-promoter, yes, but in his field that’s par for the multicourse meal.

But his habit of speaking his mischievous mind is rare, and not always appreciated.

“This was fairly unusual,” said Alaun Grimaud, the Rancho Bernardo Inn’s executive sous chef, referring to Malarkey’s tussle with chef Judd Canepari, which played out in the local media last year. “I’ve never come across two chefs bad-mouthing each other, especially in a public forum.”

Malarkey loves public forums. His 2007 “Top Chef” turn was a huge boon to his career. And it’s no accident that Searsucker occupies Fifth Avenue and Market Street, the Gaslamp’s busiest corner. On Thursday, Nancy Robins, a visitor from Seattle, stopped to gawp at the unopened restaurant’s windows. They are covered with life-size photos of men, women and children. All with the same beaming face.

“Is that you?” Robins asked the real Malarkey, standing on Fifth to admire his kingdom. “Oh my God, you are a celebrity!”

That’s the idea.

Cowboy’s kitchen

Brian Huntington Malarkey and his brother, Palmer, grew up on a ranch near Bend, Ore. After their parents divorced, the boys were raised by a mother who was also raising quarter horses. Although James Beard and Julia Child were family friends, their mother often was too busy earning grocery money to actually put food on the table.

“I didn’t always have time to fix breakfast,” said Lesley Day, Brian and Palmer’s mom. “I asked the boys, ‘Do you want to eat something besides cereal?’ They did.”

Throughout their boyhood, Palmer left most of the cooking to his brother. So when Brian’s unfocused college career — he majored in business, drama, history and taverns — fizzled, he enrolled at Le Cordon Bleu in Portland. Interning at a Los Angeles restaurant, he found his calling. Citrus was frequented by Hollywood A-listers, yet owner/chef Michel Richard was the star.

“Celebrities were in there all the time,” Malarkey said. “But they were all looking at the chef.”

Malarkey, meanwhile, mopped, washed, chopped. “I never had the best knife skills, the best palate. But I stayed late every day, I said, ‘Yes, chef,’ I found out what the chef wanted, I just persevered.”

In restaurants from Minneapolis to Seattle, Malarkey obeyed and listened and learned. He suppressed his ambitions, but never forgot them. In 2004, when the Oceanaire Seafood Room chain moved into San Diego,

General Manager Mike Mitchell interviewed Malarkey for the executive chef's job.

“Where do you see yourself, three to five years from now?” Mitchell asked.

“I want everybody to know who I am,” Malarkey replied.

Firing up ‘Top Chef’

Mitchell and Malarkey, who both left Oceanaire last year, remain good friends. Neither minds the occasional kerfuffle.

“There's this Irish glint in his eyes,” Mitchell said of Malarkey. “You just know it's a little bit of trouble, but it's going to be fun.”

Like playing with fire. Before a Liver Foundation fundraiser at the Omni San Diego Hotel, Malarkey was told that regulations prohibited anything ablaze in the dining room. His dinner, complete with menus printed on parchment, an enchanted tree growing out of a table and servers dressed as Marie Antoinette, was memorable. But it became unforgettable when he lit a three-foot-tall baked Alaska, with “fire dancers” waving their long fingernails through the flames.

Malarkey was ejected from the hotel — and invited onto TV. “That story — I swear — got me on ‘Top Chef.’ ”

Malarkey had done cooking segments on local TV and had stolen on-camera techniques from pros like the Marine Room's Bernard Guillas. But when Bravo's “Top Chef” invited him to compete in its third season, he worried. What if he bombed before a national audience?

Broadcast in 2007, the show made Malarkey a star. One of four finalists, he was eliminated in the 14th of 15 episodes. Bravo invited him to appear on “Top Chef Masters” and to write a “Top Chef” blog. His life was forever changed, which he realized when he met superchef Mario Batali at a festival.

Malarkey: “Mario, I love you!”

Batali: “My daughters love you, Brian!”

Mocking the molecular

“Top Chef” led to an invitation to cook for the catty, dim “Real Housewives of Orange County.” (The hostess, sampling Malarkey's oyster appetizer: “That's better than a beer bong!”). It also led to a San Diego Magazine blog. In that forum, Malarkey questioned molecular gastronomy, noting that El Bizcocho's then-executive chef, Canepari, was a local proponent of foam-, gel- and liquid nitrogen-accented cuisine.

Canepari did not respond then and declined to discuss Malarkey for this story. But Steven Rojas, Canepari's former chef de cuisine, fired back on Malarkey's blog. A San Diego Reader review of El Bizcocho dismissed Malarkey as “an upscale chain chef cooking a nice-enough crab cake.”

As for farm-to-table, Malarkey insists he embraces that movement's mantra of fresh, local and organic food. But he relies on vendors to patrol the fields and docks.

“Restaurants are teams,” he said last week, after meeting with Pacific Shellfish’s Tim Mavrakos. “Tim is part of my team. He’s going to get me the best fish.”


At Searsucker, he’ll need his best. Diners will judge him by his food, not his TV appearances.

“Am I showing that I’m a great chef by making a giant Rice Krispie treat? No. I enjoy going on TV, I have a great time. But if the restaurant isn’t great, I don’t have any credibility.”

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