

Iron Chef UK – Guardian REVIEW

Iron Chef, a martial arts cookery show with backflips, is utterly baffling. And great fun



A dash of Hells Angel ... Iron Chef Martin Blunos

Hello, what's this? Another cooking show? To be force-fed into TV schedules already bursting with them. Someone obviously thinks that food is the answer. To everything.

Iron Chef originated in Japan in the early 1990s. The format was more recently picked up in the US, where it's become a big hit. Now we're getting our own: **Iron Chef UK** (Channel 4). "Let the battle begin!" That's what the esteemed Chairman says. He's this Asian dude in a shiny purple shirt, some kind of martial arts master who can backflip himself across a room. It's obviously an important skill to have, in a kitchen. Except he's not in a kitchen, he's in Kitchen Stadium, an arena of epicurean theatre. Actually, it doesn't look like a kitchen or a stadium; more like the control deck of a spaceship, from the 1970s. Got it so far? A hint of Bruce Lee, a dash of Spock.

But wait, because now it all goes a bit Gladiators with the arrival of the Iron Chefs themselves – four of the most feared warrior cooks from the four corners of the world, we're told, hand-picked by the esteemed Chairman himself. Cue music, which sounds as if it's been co-composed by Carl Orff and Jon Bon Jovi. Plus metallic knife noises and accompanying graphics.

To do battle in this opening episode, the Chairman picks . . . Iron Chef Blunos! Martin Blunos is a West Country chef, with more than a hint of Latvian and Russian about him from his parents, plus quite a lot of Hells Angel, as well as a couple of Michelin stars to his name. And the special ingredient is . . . beef! Looking at Iron Chef Blunos, it's hard to see how the special ingredient could possibly have been anything else. "Here comes the Iron Chef with those forearms – whoa, look at them, they're like my legs," says Olly Smith.

Oh yes, Olly Smith – he's a TV food and wine person and the host of Iron Chef. Well, one of the two hosts, the other being Nick Nairn, yet another telly cook. Nick has the straight-guy role, analysing

knife skills, flavour combinations, that kind of thing. Olly plays more of a shouty, thrusty, Flashheart-from-Blackadder-type part. Meets Douglas Bader. "Running in, I'm like a Spitfire coming through the clouds," he says, excitedly. "Join us after the break when we shall erupt into a frenzy of judgment."

You thought the Chairman was the host? Yeah, me too, to be honest. But he's just the Chairman, a figurehead really, to add kung fu (kung food?) to the mix. Then there's Joanna Blythman and Matthew Drennan, a food critic and a food journalist, the judges, and jury ("Judges, you are our jury," says Olly, to clear that one up). And Richard, Kevin, Liz and Jason are the challengers. They go up against the Iron Chef, who has to do as many dishes on his own as they have to do collectively, though the Iron Chef does have a couple of sous-chefs, in grey, to help. The challengers are chefs, too, only not Iron Chefs. Tin chefs, more like.

There are dish-of-the-day stars to be won by one of the challengers, even though this time they're the losers, defeated by Iron Chef Blunos and his massive forearms. On Friday it all changes, with just one challenger – the one with the most dish-of-the-day stars – up against one Iron Chef. The scoring system is utterly baffling. The whole thing is, really – everything from everywhere, plus extra chillis, all chucked into the pot and turned up to gas mark 11. Yeah, baby.

Somewhere among it all, there is some cooking going on. But this is not really about the food. I don't think anyone's pretending it is. It's about spectacle – entertainment, theatre, circus. And it is fun, even though I don't really have a clue what's going on.

For now, they're putting it out at five in the afternoon, trying it out, like a new drug, on students with nothing better to do, and the unemployed. If it goes down well, it will no doubt move to later. Come Dine With Me started off in the afternoon. MasterChef, too. Ah yes, MasterChef . . . remember that? Iron Chef UK is clearly throwing everything, including the kitchen sink, at MasterChef, trying to blow it out of the water, make John and Greg look like Fanny Cradock. John? Greg? Who? Exactly . . .

Mirror – 27/4/10 Review

Get ready for a new cookery cult. This hilarious series is based on a Japanese show remade for America and now for us.

Each night, four contestants take on one of four Iron Chefs: Martin Blunos, Tom Aikens, Judy Joo and Sanjay Dwivedi.

But forget the food – the really tasty ingredient here is Olly Smith, who comes on like Matt Lucas doing [Buzz Lightyear](#).

Hyperactive even when he's presenting some quite sensible item on Saturday Kitchen, here he's been told to go for broke and don't spare the horses.

"I'm like a Spitfire coming through the clouds!" he booms as he dashes in to peer into a frying pan. Or, my personal favourite: "Join us after the break when we shall erupt in a frenzy of judgment!"

He's not even the most theatrical person on the show. That honour goes to The Chairman, who makes his entrance by flick-flacking, ninja-style, into the Kitchen Inferno. Mad – in a good way.

Independent – 27/4/10 Review

Heaven knows where the **Iron Chef** idea gets its legs from. A camped-up version of MasterChef, it has somehow migrated from the Far East to America and now to the UK, where our host is Olly Smith, a man who in search of an image appears to have been told to imagine the grown-up Billy Bunter teaching in a prep school. I know an animal behavioural expert who counsels the owners of particularly yappy dogs to spray water in their faces every time they bark, and I thought of him as I watched chubby-cheeked Smith shout his way through Iron Chef UK. A regular zap of water would calm him right down.

In fairness, though, he might be just the over-the-top presenter Iron Chef UK needs, for it is not a show that can afford to take itself the least bit seriously. The idea is that one leading chef, preferably with Michelin stars, must cook four dishes in the time that four challengers cook just one each. This is introduced as a kind of culinary form of ju-jitsu, presided over by a mysterious Eastern fellow known as "The Chairman", and it's quite as daft as it sounds, although behind the martial arts puns – I liked the idea of "morsel combat" – it's really just MasterChef in a high-speed blender.

If that sounds unpalatable, I should add that there are some nice touches. The chef Nick Nairn provides an enlightening commentary as well as a more sensible foil to the Bunteresque Smith, and it could even be that for all the camp flourishes, Iron Chef UK offers more useful tips for cooks than MasterChef. Incidentally, I recently had dinner at Smiths of Smithfield, run by MasterChef's own John Torode, and I have to say that in his own competition two of the three courses I had wouldn't have even limped through round one.

The exception was a very decent steak and chips, and beef was the main ingredient in last night's Iron Chef UK – "beeftastic!" cried Smith, with no one to squirt water in his face. Not, of course, that 5pm strictly qualifies as "night". It's a strange time to schedule the show, although, on the other hand, children will probably love it.

Metro – 27/4/10 Review

Iron Chef UK is downright tasty stuff

Is Hell's Kitchen a touch refined for your taste? Find Marco Pierre White a bit on the mealy-mouthed side? Then catch up with Iron Chef UK (C4).