





# SOONER BORN, SOONER FED

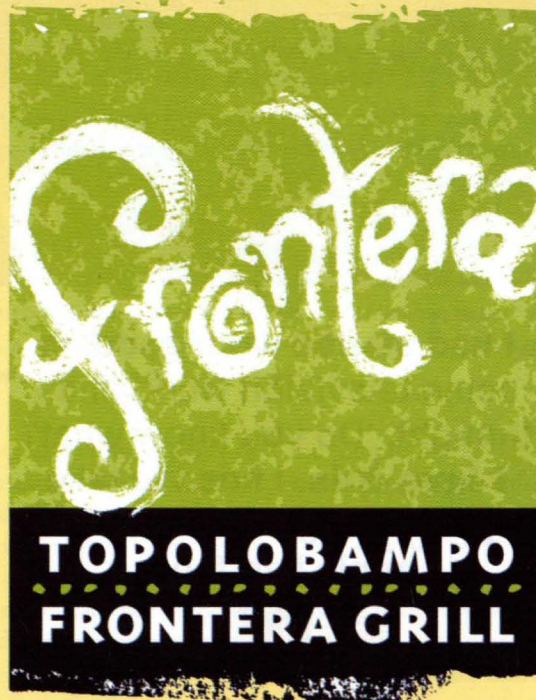
**HUMBLE BEGINNINGS AT AN OKC EATERY  
GAVE OU ALUMNUS RICK BAYLESS THE TOOLS  
HE NEEDED TO GO THE DISTANCE  
IN WINNING AMERICA'S TOP CULINARY PRIZE.**

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN  
PHOTOS PROVIDED

If you have seen Rick Bayless on his popular PBS series, "Mexico: One Plate at a Time," and wondered what the chef was like in real life, ponder no more. Even after winning the title of "Top Chef Master" in August, there is no celebrity in America less pretentious. Bayless is still the guy who welcomes viewers into his home kitchen every week as he prepares his signature Mexican meals, letting them peek over his shoulder as he puts away groceries or pokes through his refrigerator looking for a stash of poblano peppers.

The 1975 University of Oklahoma graduate seems surprised and thrilled that the kid who honed his chops in the back kitchen of a barbecue joint is now the most celebrated chef in the nation. Pleasing people with great food and comfortable atmosphere is something he comes by honestly. His parents, John and Levita Bayless, were owners of the Hickory House, one of Oklahoma City's best-loved family restaurants from 1952 to 1987.

"My most vivid memory of childhood was being in the back



The success of Frontera Grill and Topolobampo have inspired a new line of gourmet Mexican food products.

kitchen at the restaurant, doing prep work and just cooking right alongside everybody," he recalls. "It wasn't a huge staff."

Bayless opened the successful Frontera Grill in 1987, just a few blocks west of Chicago's trendy Michigan Avenue. Not long after, he introduced the city's first upscale Mexican restaurant with Topolobampo, which was chosen by *Esquire* as one of the top new restaurants in America. This past September, he added to his string of pearls on North Clark Street with a venue featuring traditional Mexican street food. A linguistics scholar, Bayless christened the sassy upstart XOCO (pronounced Shoko), which means "little sister" in Mexican slang by way of an ancient Aztec dialect.

Even as a child, Bayless was fascinated by language and foreign culture. Selling his family on the idea of a Mexican vacation when he was 14 was his first ticket to a country and cuisine he would spend the rest of his life exploring.

"When I got to Mexico, I just totally felt at home," he says.





When not on an exotic location in Mexico, Bayless uses the kitchen in his own home in Chicago as the set of his popular PBS series, "Mexico: One Plate at a Time." Now, in its seventh season, the show blends Hispanic culture and cuisine, while Bayless prepares complete Mexican meals from appetizers to desserts.

"I loved the sounds, the smells—especially the smells from the street vendors." He kicked his education into high gear, graduating from high school in three years, and enrolled in the University of Oklahoma at 17 to study Spanish and Hispanic culture.

"My experience at OU was very different than most college kids," he admits. "I commuted from Oklahoma City, taking as many classes as I could and then turned around and worked 40 hours a week in the restaurant. I was either studying or working.

"I had one instructor [Pilar Liria] I remember very vividly who taught grammar and pronunciation in the upper levels. She was from Spain, and she brought with her such a different way of looking at the world that she really helped me to see that that's what I wanted to do.

"I wanted to break away, to see what things were out there and be able to put those into my life."

Bayless graduated from OU at 20 and began working toward a Ph.D. in linguistics and anthropology at the University of



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Michigan. "I wasn't interested in going into the restaurant business," he states flatly.

In Ann Arbor, his emerging culinary skills became both his livelihood and recreation. He opened a catering business to put himself through school. On weekends, he took turns cooking large communal meals with friends, including his future wife, Deann. He humbly denies his meals were better than anyone else's.

"Everyone in this group was an amazing cook," he recalls fondly. "That was what we did for fun. Nobody had money to go out. You'd spend all week thinking about what you were going to cook and a whole day cooking it."

Bayless was close to finishing his dissertation when he began to get restless. "I finally decided to take some time off because I was not convinced I was moving in the right direction," he explains. "I decided to work hard, save money and go to Mexico."

He and Deann found consulting jobs in Los Angeles, where they could work for a few months saving "every penny" and



spend the next few months in Mexico doing research for a cookbook Bayless hoped to write.

Five years and 35,000 miles later, the Baylesses released *Authentic Mexican: Regional Cooking from the Heart of Mexico*. Published in 1987 the book received critical acclaim for its authentic revelation of regional dishes. Chef Craig Claiborne hailed it “one of the greatest contributions to the Mexican table imaginable.”

An unexpected byproduct of those nomadic years between Los Angeles and Mexico was Rick’s natural gift for television. “I had started writing, doing some television work, and I thought, ‘Do you know what? I love this. I need to take my knowledge of culture and apply it to food.’”

The result was the PBS series: “Mexico: One Plate at a Time.” Now in his seventh season, Bayless effortlessly combines cooking demonstrations and cultural musings with a friendly banter that makes the exotic accessible. After one episode in which he broke down his famous 27-ingredient mole into a four-tier approach, one viewer gushed, “I just want to hug him.”

When Bayless opened Frontera Grill in the late '80s, he brought with him all the tools he had packed away from his early days at the Hickory House.

“The one thing that I learned mostly from my father was that you taste everything before every service,” he says. “You walk through the place to make sure it looks really good, and you never let that pass.”

For 37 years, he says, his mom crossed through a checklist on every service up through and including the day she sold the restaurant. “What our business is about is exactly like putting on a performance in a theater,” he explains. “Everything has got to be right and in its place and every performance



The menu board at XOCO features traditional Mexican street food. Churros, a popular fried pastry, are served with hot chocolate ground from beans imported from southern Mexico.

perfect. You can't say, 'Oh, I did it much better last week.' Tonight's crowd wasn't there last week. You only have that one chance with the people who are in your restaurant that night. They taught me that at a very early age.”

That recipe for success has served him well. Twenty-two years after opening Frontera Grill, Bayless has expanded with a Frontera Foods product line, several more cookbooks, DVDs and a Web site where you can get everything from recipes for shrimp ceviche to advice on what to do with leftover tortilla chips. Bayless embraces social networking like a cold Tecate Mojito. He blogs, he tweets. Even his first week at XOCO, snafus and all, is out there for anyone to read.

For example, during opening day, when things got crazy—and they got crazy fast—Bayless abandoned his role as supervisor

and jumped on the line, working 11-hour shifts as they cranked out empanadas and tortas for a crowd that swelled to more than 600.

“It was not perfect, but by God, we got through the week without running out of food,” he says candidly. “Nothing good is going to be easy. So, I feel like if I put this glossy veneer on it, it's not life—so I share the whole thing.”

Many chefs are territorial about their signature dishes. Even families hoard certain recipes. Not Bayless. It is all out there and if it is not, just ask. He will get back to you.

“To me when people are secretive about their dishes, it shows a lack of confidence in their own creative ability,” he says. “My favorite thing in the world is to create things. I'll give you my recipe because by the time you master it, I'm gonna be on to something else. Our menus are constantly evolving.”

So are his programs. In 2003 Bayless established the Frontera Farmer Foundation to support small Midwestern farms. What





Warm colors, fresh flowers and great food welcome visitors to Frontera Grill, the restaurant that started it all. Bayless spent years researching the flavors of regional Mexican cooking before opening Frontera in 1987. While he found the inspiration for his recipes south of the border, he learned the restaurant business close to home--at his parent's barbecue place in Oklahoma City.

started off as a no-interest loan program soon morphed into a grant-giving foundation. "I always try to buy locally, and we were working with a lot of small farms that just didn't have the money to buy the equipment they needed to become more productive." Through the foundation, Bayless distributed his entire \$100,000 Top Chef Master prize to deserving local farmers.

It was money hard-earned. Bayless says the experience of Top Chef Masters made the opening week of XOCO seem like "a walk in the park." He had been working to open the new restaurant when he was invited to participate in the Bravo network competition. "I said yes because truthfully, I didn't think I'd get very far—a commitment of a couple of days or so," he admits. "Then I won and I had to go back, and *then* it became quite a crazy time for us."

For the show, the finalists were asked to create a meal that would exemplify why they had wanted to become a chef in the first place. Bayless chose "the absolutely hardest mole there is. I wanted to show that I could actually do it. It was a recipe I worked on for 10 years before I mastered it enough to put it on my restaurant menu."




**There are times when I say, 'I just need to go cook.' I hope to have great ideas all the rest of my life.**



With the skillfulness of Tita, the mythical heroine of *Like Water for Chocolate*, Bayless poured his heart and soul into each dish, and the judges savored every nuance. He honored his parents with barbecued quail smoked with Hickory House sauce served with sour slaw and watermelon salad. The achiote-marinated suckling pig with sunchoke puree was an overwhelming favorite. His black mole over ahi tuna, served with plantain tamale and grilled nopales, brought down the house.

"The competition was by far the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," he states, and one of the most rewarding. Bayless seemed awestruck that a kid from Oklahoma City with no formal culinary training had risen to the top of his field. As gratified as he was to be in the spotlight, he was happier still to return to the kitchen.

"When I am cooking and concentrating, I lose track of time. I'm in this place that's very different and a totally rewarding place to be," he concludes. "It's one of my favorite places to go. There are times when I say, 'I just need to go cook.' I hope to have great ideas all the rest of my life." 

*Lynette Lobban is associate editor of Sooner Magazine.*