

Review: Girl and the Goat

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FROM GOAT TO HERO: Stephanie Izard, everywhere at once and nowhere at all for two years, finally makes good on her promise in the West Loop

BY JEFF RUBY



Party animals flock to the Goat.

[STEPHANIE IZARD, INC. »](#)

Our April 2010 profile of the celebrity chef

If the world of Chicago chefs were one big high school, Stephanie Izard would be homecoming queen.

Like the flirty girl on the swim team who makes honor roll every semester but also knows her way around a keg stand, she is irresistible to the cool kids and to the rest of us.

But restaurant years are longer than high-school years—hell, they're longer than dog years—and two big ones have passed since millions of viewers fell hard for the salty Evanston native during season 4 of Bravo's *Top Chef*. Izard spent much of the interim tweeting, Facebooking, blogging, carousing, and hosting farm and underground dinners, all of which kept her name out there but also risked triggering an epidemic of Acute Stephanie Fatigue. (Ironic, considering she didn't, you know, have a restaurant.) The industry that loved Izard at Scylla in 2005 and celebrated her TV triumph in 2008 began to wonder if the notorious party girl would ever settle down and capitalize on her fame. "She is in a difficult spot," says a local chef who wishes to remain anonymous. "Her win was years ago, and the restaurant is just now opening."



Izard reinvents the Fudgsicle Whether the prolonged wait was a product of (a) the usual grind that accompanies a restaurant opening, (b) ridiculous perfectionism, or (c) the distractions of celebrity life, it's immaterial: *Girl & the Goat* is a difficult spot in which most chefs would kill to be. Izard, 33, hooked up with proven winners (Kevin Boehm and Rob Katz, on a hot streak with Boka, Landmark, and Perennial), who interviewed more than 1,200 candidates for front-of-house positions, cherry-picking the most energetic for their Goat army. For the kitchen, Izard landed a butcher, a baker, and an insane heat maker: respectively, Nightwood's Enoch Simpson, Taxim's Greg Wade, and a \$15,000 Mugnaini wood-burning oven—all three game changers.

The partners paid 555 International, a fashionable Chicago design firm, \$1.65 million to transform two old industrial buildings into a striking space that Izard loves to describe as "rustic with a bit of badass." "Rustic" might refer to the burnt cedar wood and exposed beams or maybe to the brilliant iron fireplace covers behind a French oak bar. The badass part must be Quang and Loc Hong's unsettling painting of a girl and a goat, which looks like some kind of twisted anime nightmare. (Izard has a smaller canvas by Quang in her bedroom. No wonder she never sleeps.) From the handcrafted barstools to the blocky communal oak tables that flank the kitchen, the smoky-toned space throbs with nonstop action. Pretty much every foodie, fauxhemian, and chef in town has already dropped by and snagged the seats the rest of us have been fighting over. And the gracious servers, all unpretentious and adamant food nerds, are everywhere with their black T-shirts and giddy grins.

At the center of it all is Izard, a curly-haired, benevolent mass of energy. This is no detached celebrity chef strutting around to pass judgment and glad-hand without getting dirty. She arrives at seven every morning, cooks all day, and expedites every dish. "Stephanie leads by example," says Boehm, who had his eye on her pre-*Top Chef*. "She doesn't expect anything out of others that she doesn't do herself." That's the kind of line partners practice at home in front of the mirror, but on both my visits, through the open shelves that partially obscure the kitchen, I saw Izard on the line, hustling with her team.

The egalitarian approach pays off. Most everything that emerges from that kitchen—"like a candy shop for meat lovers," says Izard—is fresh and fun. It's also imperfect. For every small-plate stunner, such as a soft-shell crab over an elote-inspired mix of lime-spritzed sweet corn kernels in a chili aioli, there's a gimmicky misfire like the overly salty escargots and "goatballs" (not what you think) with bagna cauda and almonds. Instead of taking the straightforward path of, say, *The Purple Pig*, Izard often goes for the wow factor, cooking with the urgency of a chef still being judged by Tom Colicchio. "To my palate, those weird things sometimes work really well," she says. "I'm just trying to make your whole mouth happy." It's a risk that generates seemingly effortless mini masterpieces, such as a wonderful sweet-salty seared flounder on a bed of silky cod brandade with tart plums and roasted sweet onions. Izard preternaturally understands when to undercut a smooth texture with a sprinkle of cashews or pistachios. ("What nut are you going to use next?" her sous-chef loves to tease.) But seafood and meat shack up so often—octopus with quanciale, scallops with veal, clams with sausage—that I found myself craving something uncomplicated. Which I got in the pork liver mousseline, a creamy dream of a spread with homemade crumpets and cherry mostarda. Evocative dish names like *Crispy Pig Face* and *Smokey Whipped Fat Back* catch your eye and your imagination, and the line-up changes so fast that if you recommend a dish to a friend, it's probably gone by the time the poor schmo lands a reservation. Makes me wonder what I missed.

On an affordable menu loaded with gutsy creations, perhaps the riskiest gambit is the \$4 charge for bread. However, Greg Wade's baked wares, such as a dense little loaf of Corny Goat Bread with an excellent whipped goat cheese and a corn relish, are fully realized appetizers. Even seemingly innocuous vegetables like roasted cauliflower and sautéed green beans—relegated to unglamorous sides in most restaurants—get the royal treatment here. IZARD does her own desserts, imaginative savory-sweet stuff like frozen corn nougat and deconstructed Fudgsicles with olive oil gelato. She gets points for audacity, but the only finale that really strikes gold is the goat cheese bavaroiis ("like a Bavarian cream that went to charm school in Paris," our waiter says), a sensation with blueberry compote and brown sugar cake.

A restaurant is about more than just one person, of course, but the ebullient staff never lets you forget who the star is. It's Chef this and Chef that, and by the end of my second visit, I wanted to toss out whatever Kool-Aid the management is pouring and hire a deprogrammer. I assume servers will learn to focus more on pacing and less on how clever it is that IZARD rolls a pig's face around a tongue before braising and oven-roasting it. But until they do, what's cute quickly becomes self-aggrandizing and amateurish. The truth, though: These gushing kids are perfect for the Goat's vision. Everything about the restaurant is aggressive, from the salting and the inspired cocktails to the craft beer list and the saucy name. If you don't believe me on that last one, try a Google image search for "girl and the goat." Don't do it at work.

IZARD is a Celebrity Chef 2.0, the kind who puts a live webcam in the kitchen and tweets to her 67 zillion followers during dinner rush about the kick-ass goat kidneys stuffed with goat confit she's working on. Her life is an open iPad, her persona alternately colossal and at our fingertips. It's a savvy strategy that cuts both ways: I want to return to Girl & the Goat but must steel myself for more genuflecting at the throne of Stephanie. And I'm one of the 67 zillion.

THE SKINNY

GIRL & THE GOAT

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FYI Walking in without a reservation? Godspeed. Order a refreshing Best of Three (Grey Goose, Pimm's Number One, mint, lime, cucumber; \$10) and be prepared to order another.

TAB \$40 to \$49 (without alcohol, tax, or tip)

HOURS Dinner nightly

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANNA KNOTT