



Brooke Williamson on "BBQ Brawl." (Food Network photo)

BTS: BROOKE WILLIAMSON

It's all about the food for 'BBQ Brawl' judge and 'Bobby's Triple Threat' 'Titan' Brooke Williamson

When it comes to food fights, Brooke Williamson has many titles: Competitor, celebrity, champion. But her preference is chef.

The Bravo and Food Network star is a fierce force in the culinary world, making a name for herself by winning the biggest kitchen clashes and tournament titles.

Like her mentors, for Williamson, it's all about the food.

By choosing flavor over fanfare and finesse over flashy, Williamson has earned praise from her peers: She is a sought-out contestant, an in-demand judge, and the person other people want to challenge to measure their skills.

Frequent collaborator and noted chef Bobby Flay said, "Brooke Williamson runs circles around the competition. Her California cuisine is packed with explosive flavor. If you think you've got her beat, don't take a breath: She's got another gear."

Whether as a contender or a critic, one thing you won't often find associated with Williamson is criticism. As the former, her plates are flawless and her flavors irreproachable. When serving as the latter, she opines with consideration – never cutting down those she's evaluating.

This summer, Williamson gets to showcase both sides of her brilliant battle brain: She returns as a judge on "BBQ Brawl" and as a "Titan" looking to defend her dominion of deliciousness on "Bobby's Triple Threat." Both shows air on Food Network.

Williamson shared more in this edited Q&A.

Behind the Screens: You once told me that being a good chef and being a good competition chef are not the same thing. What would you say makes you excel in both areas?

Brooke Williamson: I think being a chef, for the most part, is generally about repetition and experience and understanding of fundamentals. There is an element of that, obviously, that is needed for competition cooking. If you don't have the experience of repetition and the confidence to know that you can put a dish together in your head before you make it, then you're in trouble.

But they're very different skills, and I will stick by that 100%. Being a great competitive chef doesn't necessarily mean you're a phenomenal chef, although it is hard to win things without being a good chef. But, being a great chef does not necessarily mean you're going to be a great competitive chef. There are all sorts of elements that come into play, whether it be the clock, or the decision making, that are very specific to competition.

BTS: Tell me about "BBQ Brawl." I was really surprised to see how many acclaimed competitors you have this season.

Brooke Williamson: Yeah, and they're from all walks of life, in terms of where they come from, the type of cuisine that they're known for, their genres of live fire or barbecue. It's such a fun season.

And that goes also for the captains. You know, Sunny and Michael and Bobby are all such different chefs – or home cooks, as Sunny would call herself – and it's so much fun seeing the dynamic between the captains and team members.

BTS: Speaking of Bobby, you're back for another season of "Bobby's Triple Threat," of course. I'm wondering: How difficult is that competition relative to some of the other ones you participate in on Food network.

Brooke Williamson: It's a different kind of difficult, and it's incredibly difficult. And a lot of the pressure that comes with that environment is pressure that we all put on ourselves – which I think is the best kind. I think, honestly, the healthiest type of pressure; it makes you want to grow as a chef, as a person, as a competitor.

I think myself, Michael and Tiffany have all gotten better at handling the pressure, but we never feel it less from show to show. That anxiety and that pressure that you see us feeling on TV, we really feel it every single time; because, in order for us to deserve the title of "Titan," we have to bring it, right? We have to win more than we lose. I think we all go into it feeling like our job is on the line every single day.

Chef, food competition champion, restaurateur and cookbook author Williamson is online at www.chefbrookewilliamson.com. "BBQ Brawl" airs at 9 p.m. Mondays, and "Bobby's Triple Threat" airs at 9 p.m. Tuesdays on Food Network.

BTS: ASHLEY NEWBROUGH

Christmas is in, but hot cocoa is definitely out, for Hallmark star Ashley Newbrough

Ashley Newbrough's characters are all about second chances. But in real life, the in-demand Canadian-American actress can't help but hold a grudge. ... Against hot chocolate.

On set, Newbrough has come to appreciate writers (she played one in "Small Town Christmas" and "Snowmance"), science and skiing (with "Love in Glacier National"), and even golf ("Love on the Right Course"). A popular fixture in holiday movies, she's worked all around the world – yet, despite all her travels, what's usually a comforting and creamy concoction remains a Swiss miss for Newbrough.

As her new "Christmas in July" film debuts on Hallmark Movies Now, the aspirational ace explained her hot chocolate aversion – and shared more about "Operation Nutcracker" – in this edited Q&A.

Behind the Screens: Tell me about "Operation Nutcracker" and what appealed to you about this particular movie.

Ashley Newbrough: "Operation Nutcracker," it's about an event planner, Lottie Morgan, who is given a lifetime opportunity to host the annual Warby Christmas charity auction, and proceeds go to the children's hospital. She's very nervous about it. She wants to do her best.

And so, she meets with Evelyne Warby (Jennifer Dale) and she lands the job, and this whole event is revolving around this nutcracker, which will be auctioned off at the event. She meets Tristan Warby (Christopher Russell), the son of Evelyne, at the airport. She doesn't know who he is. They have the same bags, so they kind of meet because of their mistaken bags. It was a bit of a bag mix-up at the airport. So, she meets him, thinks nothing of it, and then meets him again when she arrives to do her big interview.

They are working together to plan this event and soon find out that he does not have the nutcracker, and his bag has been swapped with someone they don't know. They have to find this nutcracker before the time runs out.

So, they go through this guy's bag and they're able to find his agenda. They try to track him down based on what he's doing throughout the week – and it happens to be all sorts of different Christmas activities. There's a tree farm. There's a Christmas market. There's a ballet. They go to these different places hoping to find him. And it's fun. It's a good time.

BTS: You mentioned you shot this one in November. Did filming this during that time of year help?

Ashley Newbrough: Oh, it definitely helps. We shot this one, it was end of November and it went into December a little bit. And, oh yeah, it definitely helps to film within the season.

First and foremost, because of the weather – because there's nothing like wearing Christmas wardrobe in the middle of summer. It's just a different feeling altogether, and it can be very distracting being that hot and trying to act cold and wear all these layers and sweaters and jackets.

It definitely helped to shoot this one in November and December. And plus, you're already in the Christmas mood, and it kind of just extends the celebration, and it's nice, for sure.

BTS: Now, I seem to recall you telling me something fairly controversial in one of our past interviews. It's been a little bit of time since we've chatted, so, I've got to follow up: Are you still on the outs with hot chocolate?

Ashley Newbrough: You know, I need to try it again, I think. I think I need to give it a second chance – and maybe try it without milk, because the problem, for me, with hot chocolate, is it usually involves milk, and I don't drink milk. So maybe that's why it's not working for me. But, I'm willing to give it another shot. Maybe with water or oat milk or almond milk or one of those.

I do like chocolate. It doesn't make sense that I don't like hot chocolate (laughs).

Well, I should make it my mission. Come December, I'll look for some hot chocolate that is dairy-free and then let you know.

"Operation Nutcracker" is streaming on Hallmark Movies Now. Visit <https://www.hmnow.com/>.

•Read more BTS with Joshua Maloni at wnypapers.com.



Ashley Newbrough as Lottie Morgan. (Credit: ©2024 Hallmark Media/photographer: Courtesy Vortex Media)

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