



# Documenting Detroit's CITY OF CHEFS

Director/producer/chef Keith Famie has spent the last nine months working on a documentary that pays tribute to Detroit's culinary past and present. Here's a peek into his process before the Detroit PBS series premieres later this year.

BY JIM MCFARLIN // PHOTOS BY JOSH SCOTT

**K** Keith Famie is really putting this 84-year-old man through his paces. It's like an acuity test for seniors.

When the gentleman begins to answer one of his questions, Famie stops him. "I'm going to ask you that question again, and mention how you got to Detroit, and why Detroit," he instructs.

Moments later, Famie breaks in again. "Just because I have a short window of time with you today, what was your first impression of Detroit?"

"Oh. I'm sorry," the gentleman replies.

"No, you're OK," Famie says, "as long as you don't mind if I stop you once in a while."

The gentleman is Sameer Eid, founder and owner since 1971 of Birmingham's Phoenicia restaurant, one of the longest-running and most famous Lebanese-American restaurants in metro

Detroit. While Eid's son, Samy, handles most of the business affairs now, Sameer still comes in regularly to chat with diners who have been his customers for decades. And when Famie learns Sameer arrived at the restaurant that day in his vintage white '60s Corvette convertible, he can hardly contain himself.

"Sameer, can we get you to go back out to your car, pull out of the driveway, then drive back in and park so we can see you arriving?"

Bizarre request, but Sameer graciously complies. That's because he knows Famie, the award-winning Detroit celebrity chef turned multi-Michigan Emmy Award-winning producer-director, is filming him for his upcoming series *Detroit: The City of Chefs*. The



From left: Mike Ransom and Keith Famie pose before a spread of noodles and other entrees on the set of *Detroit: The City of Chefs*. They are filming a segment inside Corktown's Ima Izakaya, where Ransom is the chef and owner.





Director of Photography and editor Brendan Martin (left) looks through the monitor at Ransom as he strains noodles on the kitchen line at Ima Izakaya.

docuseries (originally intended to be a documentary film) is set to premiere Dec. 9 at the Novi Emagine theater before airing the following night on Detroit PBS. “You see stories like his and it gives me hope,” Famie says while savoring the sumptuous lunch Phoenicia prepared for him and his crew. “I’m 64 now and still driving this train, but he’s still relevant. And for me to be able to shine a light on individuals like Sameer, to remind future generations or even current generations of their contributions, I’m excited. He deserves this time in his life. The film focuses on young people, too, but I feel like an ambassador.”

Sameer is one of at least 60 interviewees Famie will film for his latest production, which traces and celebrates the rich history of Detroit’s culinary industry — with every ethnic group from the Italians and Polish to the Greeks and Arab Americans contributing to the city’s entrée excellence — and highlights the new generation of chefs striving to carry on our kitchen tradition.

And it’s guaranteed that every interview will be as meticulous, impassioned, and flexible as this morning’s with Sameer. That’s just who Keith Famie is.

“He’s relentless,” marvels Fred Nahhat, senior vice president for production at Detroit PBS and Famie’s broadcast partner through nearly 18 years and more than 20 televised films hailing Detroit as the home of churches, hot rods, and many things in between. “It might come from that ethos as a chef. When you think of him back in the day at Chez Raphael, Les Auteurs, and other places I wasn’t making the money to afford, that’s what he was like then.

“But I wouldn’t paint him as esoteric,” Nahhat explains. “He’s very accessible. He’s a Detroit storyteller. He’s a hard worker, innovative, and he never stops. He’s a blue-collar filmmaker, and I mean that in the best way possible. There’s nothing but honesty coming out of his projects, and that’s pretty unique. At least once a week, I tell a filmmaker who wants to get on the air here, ‘Go talk to Keith. Get some advice from him.’”

That advice might include taking an honest look at the production being developed. “I look at four things when I step into any project, and all four have to work in sync or these things collapse,” Famie explains. “Who’s going to care about it? How is it going to help somebody in some way? Where is it going to be shown, and who’s going to pay for it? If you say, ‘I’m making a film, but I’m not sure what it’s going to be,’ or you don’t have a place to air it, nobody’s going to fund it. And these things are really expensive to make.”

His long partnership with Detroit PBS helps assure potential funders that his films will be seen. But is Detroit *really* the city of chefs? Obviously, Famie thinks so: He notes that there were once more certified master chefs in



Above: Famie organized the Legends of the Stove event, which took place at the Detroit Athletic Club this past January. It featured a multigenerational cast of chefs and restaurant professionals from metro Detroit.

Michigan, 11, than anywhere else in the nation, most of them in metro Detroit. One of them, master chef Ed Janos of London Chop House and Money Tree legend, thinks it goes deeper than that.

“I didn’t realize it until I moved away,” says Janos, a Detroit native now based in Denver who stood up with Famie at his wedding. “It was just such a tight, tight culture. We weren’t afraid to share secrets and recipes and ideas with one another. It was just such a camaraderie, and I developed great friendships with fellow chefs. I’ve been fortunate to cook in many places in the U.S., and there’s not the camaraderie I experienced in Detroit.”

Famie believes there’s a direct correlation between the automotive industry and the rise of superior chefs here. “Detroit was always considered kind of a ‘flyover city,’ but auto execs

were traveling all over the world,” he says. “They may dine in downtown Chicago or New York, and their expectation level is only as high as it is for that moment. But the restaurants here deal with the same customers over and over, so the quality and consistency has to be at a very high level. I don’t want to say Detroit’s culinary community works harder than anyone else in the country, but they work damn hard.”

Between his culinary celebrity and second career in filmmaking, Famie achieved a measure of national notoriety appearing as a contestant on CBS’s *Survivor: The Australian Outback* in 2001, eventually finishing third overall. The reality series not only beat out *Friends* in its time slot but also was the highest-rated show on TV that season.

The series did elevate his national profile enough to land him a series on Food Network, *Keith Famie’s Adventures*, and shows and appearances on Detroit TV as well. But ultimately, “the *Survivor* thing put such a magnifying glass on your life and everything, I was totally fine with, ‘Let’s step behind the camera,’” Famie recalls. “I mean, when you’re on a reality show, you have to grow a very thick skin. I

enjoyed being invisible, and telling other people’s stories allowed me to do that.”

In 1998, he launched Visionalist Entertainment Productions. What’s “Visionalist” — a word he coined himself — supposed to mean? “Nobody asks me that anymore,” Famie says with a smile. “But there’s a story behind it. Years ago, I read a saying: ‘To dream is to fantasize; to visualize is to expect.’ The point is, you cannot do anything without visualization.

“As a chef, you walk through a market, see a cut of meat, and say, ‘I’m going to make that tonight.’ You’re already visualizing the outcome. When I created the name, people said, ‘That means nothing.’ I said, ‘It means everything.’ Sometimes with films I have to wait a long time to get just the right clip. I already know where it’s going in the film. So much of what we do in the field is about that visualization, seeing where we want to go with our project. We’re visionalists.”

And with that vision come certain guiding principles when Famie is on location. “I have a very strict narrative to my filmmaking: See it, say it; say it, see it,” he says. “If I don’t have the visuals





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—Fred Nahhat, senior vice president for production at Detroit PBS, about Keith Famie



to tell the story, then we have to let it go. Another point I stress with my crew is, the story we’re going to tell is not always the story we’re going to tell. The film we aired last year, *Detroit: The City of Hot Rods and Muscle Cars*, ended up with a story about Parkinson’s disease because we found a woman who continued to cruise despite being in stage 4. You never know how these things will work out, so you have to be flexible.”

Famie didn’t visualize how difficult the transition from chef to cinema would be. “It was economic suicide, for sure,” he says, laughing now. “Everyone in my family thought I had lost my mind. Every time I would walk into an interview, someone would say, ‘Where are you cooking now? Where is your restaurant?’ I’d respond, ‘Oh, I’m producing now.’

“How do you know how to do that?” they would ask. I’d tell them, ‘I already knew how from my food things.’ It wasn’t a stretch; it was just a pivot.”

Famie pivots a lot. He’s a producer and a fundraiser, and while his director of photography,

Brendan Martin, has done the majority of editing on his recent films, Famie is part of the process. *City of Chefs* will include stop-motion animation sequences, which he commissioned, produced by students at the College for Creative Studies and scenes from the one-time Legends of the Stove charity event, which he organized, at the Detroit Athletic Club. And practically every film Famie produces is accompanied by a companion book ... which he writes. He’s a man in constant motion, which comes as no surprise to chef Brian Polcyn, Famie’s friend since high school.

“He’s always been like that ever since I can remember,” says Polcyn, a nationally known charcuterie expert whose new cookbook *Meat Pies* comes out this fall. “That’s just his personality. Even when he was a chef, he always had something else going on. I equate it to fishing on a pier: I’d have one line in the water, and he would have nine. But he seems to have found his niche, which is good.”

But why a series about chefs now, after almost

In recent years, Brendan Martin has done the majority of editing on Famie’s television projects. Here, he captures close-ups of signature dishes at Ima Izakaya, including ramen and tuna tartare.

20 years of focusing on so many other subjects? “I don’t really have a good answer for that, other than I’ve always wanted to tell this story,” Famie muses. “I’ve always understood the importance of our culinary heritage, and I had a conversation with Brian Polcyn that made me say, ‘I think it’s time to dive into this.’ I guess maybe in a subconscious way I was reflecting upon where I came from personally. I started seeing other chefs getting older, falling off the radar screen, and thought it was time.”

He had other stories to tell first. “I’m always looking for, ‘How is this story going to affect someone? How is it going to make people think about their own lives, or gain a perspective? Change a paradigm of thinking about other people, or humanity itself?’ That’s the jazz for me.”