

what's the past tense of fly for free?*



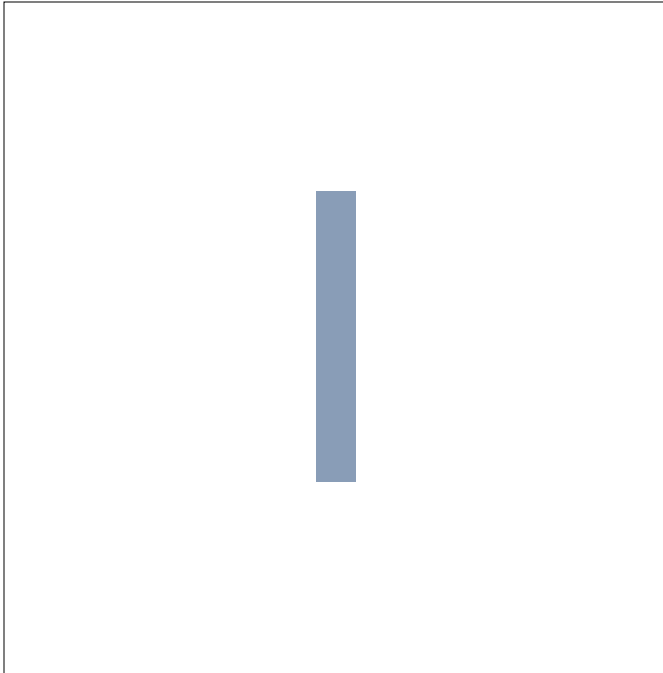


*IT'S FLAY!



As in Bobby, TV's friendliest food phenom, NetJets' most loyal nonpaying customer and a man on the verge of a jet card.

BY NICK KOLAKOWSKI — PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN SPANIER



If you ever need proof that the “celebrity chef” phenomenon is more than just some studio executive’s ratings-boosting malarkey, simply swing by the Mesa Grill at Caesars Palace at the tail end of the lunch rush. The kitchen will be in full swing — hot enough to make your brow slick with sweat, a hurricane of knives, flames and steam — but that won’t dissuade the small crowd of visitors clustered at the portal of the open kitchen, peering into the bustle for a glimpse of the one, the only . . .

“That’s him. Bobby Flay!”

Today, it’s a middle-aged couple (he’s portly and white-bearded, she’s got a twinkle in her eye; call them Mr. and Mrs. Claus) brandishing a hardcover book in front of them as if it were a talisman. Flay, executive chef of this and four other restaurants, fixture of the Food Network (where he hosts four — soon to be five — shows), author of the cookbook Mr. Claus holds aloft (one of eight Flay has published), steps away from his station in the heart of the kitchen and strides over, if only to keep the Clauses from colliding with the waiters rushing past.

“How you doing? Who do I make it out to?” he says, signing the inside cover of the book. He’s polite, still preoccupied by the kitchen but grateful for the attention, which only increases as another couple approaches. These two brandish an infant.

“Can we get a picture of you with the baby?”

If you were an accomplished chef 30 years ago — unless your name was Julia Child — you cooked your food, wrote your cookbooks and maybe received a few letters from satisfied diners or snapshots with visiting entertainers to hang on your wall. Nowadays, whether it’s Gordon Ramsay imparting a 100-decibel lesson in the finer points of sautéing to quaking apprentices on Fox’s *Hell’s Kitchen*, or Anthony Bourdain taking down Emeril Lagasse and Rachael Ray in print, top chefs indeed have become full-fledged celebrities, with all the twenty-first-century trappings that entails:

The fan sites. The publicists. The production company. The quick jaunts on NetJets to catch the racehorse named after your TV-star wife go off in the second at Saratoga.

All that’s for later, though. Right now, Flay has a more pressing concern: changing some of the restaurant’s menu items for spring. It’s an operation Flay never misses at any of his restaurants, even when, as now, he’s on book tour. The staff gathers around a giant stainless-steel bowl flanked by bins of ingredients, and the 43-year-old French Culinary Institute graduate starts to pinch and pour, moving with the economical grace of a surgeon while his top attendants stand poised to pass him whatever he requests:

“Tomato, red onion. . . .” Bins of tomato and onion chunks are held out to meet his flying hands.

“Citrus. . . .” Ruby-red grapefruit bits rain down on the bowls.

“I need a pair of tongs!”

Flay is famous for his Southwestern cuisine, a specialty he inherited from the man he calls his mentor, chef/restaurant owner Jonathan Waxman — “the first person to bring West Coast and Mexican ingredients to the East Coast.” That he remains wedded to a style of cooking that went out of fashion at most high-end establishments with the fading of the Santa Fe craze 15 years ago is one of the reasons the Anthony Bourdains of the world don’t necessarily regard Flay a tastemaker of the first order — which Flay seems to find only mildly annoying. “I’m tempted to *not* go in the direction of trends. If some of my chefs had their way, we’d be doing Asian food — this place would be a sushi bar. Southwestern is an exciting cuisine. There are plenty of ways to change it and refresh it, and it’s always packed with flavor.” Besides, he might add, people love it.

Flay’s tongs swirl, mixing red, purple, ruby, amber and tan. He shoves the bowl aside, drips a few decorative swirls of sauce onto a waiting plate and tops it with a pile of greens, chunks of beets and a sprinkle of crumbled feta cheese. “More is not better,” he tells his staff. “As an appetizer, that’s plenty of food.”

The end result is beet salad: one of many new dishes that will be served tonight to the gamblers and tourists who will pour in from the casino floor. Before the dinner rush, Flay will head upstairs to the room that Caesars provides to keep him from having to buy a house in Vegas (“I don’t even want to make my own bed here. I want to get up, come down to the restaurant”) and catch a few minutes away from giving everybody what they want.

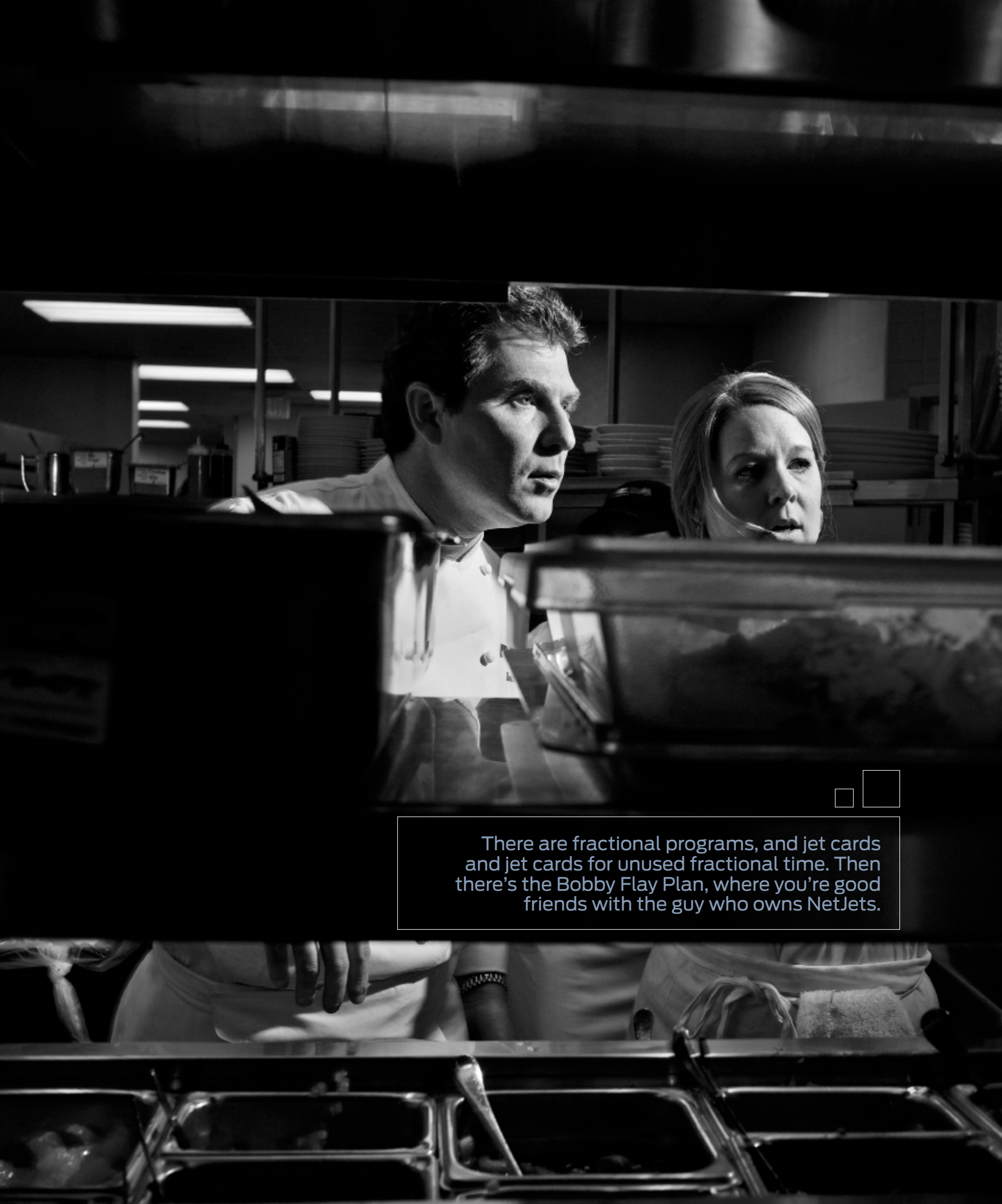
The Bobby Flay Plan

“Oh, my God, it’s Bobby Flay!”

“I watch his show all the time!”

“You’re cuter in person than you are on TV — you’re gorgeous!”

Flay has stepped outside the relative sanctuary of the Mesa Grill onto the curious dichotomy of the casino floor. Even as groupies continue to mob (“I appreciate the sentiment,” he tells the woman who finds him so attractive, “but are you sure you aren’t drunk?”), just a few feet away, gamblers sit at rows of curved desks, oblivious to the commotion, their eyes glued to tennis matches, basketball games and horse races flickering across a bank of screens as huge as a NASA control center. Flay pauses to stare for a moment at one of the screens flashing the results from earlier in the afternoon



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“Honestly, if Anthony Bourdain never had another word to say about another chef, I’d be OK with that.”

at Gulfstream Park. It confirms what he already knew: Smokin’ Stephanie (an apt name, as anyone who has ever seen Flay’s wife, Stephanie March, on *Law & Order: SVU* will surely agree) finished next to last. “She ran terribly,” he says, shaking his head.

The scene is emblematic of the crossroads at which Flay finds himself these days: not with his restaurants (going like gangbusters, with locations in Vegas, Atlantic City, Paradise Island and two in New York), not in his personal life (beautiful wife, adorable 11-year-old daughter from a previous marriage, spacious apartment in New York’s Chelsea neighborhood) or TV career. No, Bobby Flay has simply reached the point, no doubt familiar to many of you, where it has become increasingly difficult to delay paying for his private-jet travel.

Today, private-aviation customers face a multitude of options for how to structure and finance their membership in life’s loftiest fraternity. There is outright ownership, of course, and chartering. There are fractional programs, and jet cards and jet cards for unused blocks of time in fractional programs. Then there’s the Bobby Flay Plan, where you’re good friends with the guy who owns NetJets.

Richard Santulli, founder and CEO of the world’s largest fractional company, met Flay six years ago through mutual friends in the horse business; the two now jointly own five Kentucky fillies and broodmares. Smokin’ Stephanie’s performance today notwithstanding, they’ve shared a fair amount of success (one of their 3-year-olds, *Grace & Power*, was nominated for this year’s Kentucky Oaks), and their jaunts around the racing world — to tracks, sale auctions and their breeding operations in the rolling bluegrass outside Lexington — aboard the cream of the 600-plane NetJets fleet have become Flay’s favorite new activity. “I just love it, the thoroughbreds *and* the bourbon,” he says.

In the process, Flay has become NetJets’ most loyal non-paying customer. So deep does his commitment run that recently, a rival jet-card company offered him \$50,000 in free air time to start flying on its jets. Flay turned the offer down. “I’d never consider flying with anybody else.”

There are, of course, limitations to the Bobby Flay Plan. (“Are you *sure* you aren’t going to Vegas next week?”) Free semi-frequent flying also comes with another problem: It can flat-out ruin you for the rest of your time in the air, especially when you rack up as many miles as Bobby Flay does. Indeed, with five TV series, restaurants spread across three states and two countries and an ingrained inability to be hands-off with any of it — not to mention a national commercial aviation system that each day seems to edge ever closer to collapse — Flay is probably one missed connection or canceled flight away from springing for a \$130,000 Marquis/NetJets jet card — if not a whole-hog \$400,000 one-sixteenth NetJets share.

“I really need to get around to it,” he sighs. “It’s just so much easier. I’m sure Richard will be happy.”

Throwdown

Perhaps it was inevitable. Consider the screaming and profanity on *Hell’s Kitchen*. Consider Bourdain’s mean-spirited broadsides against poor Rachael Ray (“Rachael has used her strange and terrible powers to narcotize her public.” Ouch). Some argue that America’s celebrity-chef culture has begun to veer into WWE territory, and they lay much of the blame at the feet of Bobby Flay. Back in 2000, before the Food Network created *Iron Chef America* and cast Flay as one of its stars, the original badly dubbed Japanese version was emerging from its late-night kitschy cult status to become a prime-time mainstream American hit. Flay was one of the upstart challengers, facing off against chef Masaharu Morimoto in a special New York-based episode. The principal ingredient was rock crab. At the end of the appointed hour, having dodged an array of dangers including electrocution and an attack from a psychotic Cuisinart, flush with what he believed was impending victory, Flay jumped atop his counter and cutting board and raised his fists in the air.

Flay lost the match — but Morimoto was, to put it mildly, upset. “Cutting boards and knives are sacred to us,” he told a reporter.

One year later, a rematch between the two in Tokyo involved

another crustacean — Japanese lobsters — and Flay won. This time, though, he did the polite thing, removing the cutting board and then jumping onto the counter.

These two appearances helped cement Flay place in the burgeoning Food Network's lineup. He was subsequently tapped to host several shows with some sort of macho or combative title or theme. But there's one thing people sometimes forget about Bobby Flay, and it throws the whole Bobby Flay-as-Vince McMahon theory out the window: He's a great loser.

Take *Throwdown*, on which he steps outside his culinary comfort zone to challenge chefs around the country to a cook-off based on their specialty — taking on everyone from Upper West Side cookie bakers to Deep South barbecue masters. It's proven a winner for the Food Network, but more often than not, it's the beefy Buffalo-wing king or the New York City cookie mamas who finish on top. "I'm not trying to go around beating people up; I'm really not interested in that," Flay says. "We push for them to be their best."

As for Ramsay and Bourdain, he has this to add: "Here's the difference: Gordon Ramsay is a good chef. Anthony Bourdain is not . . . and even admits it. And that kind of irritates me a bit, you know? Honestly, I wish he didn't have that much to say. Honestly, if he never had another word to say about another chef, I'd be OK with that."

Bobby Flay, too, is a good chef. The French Culinary Institute training, two-star *New York Times* reviews, three years running as an NYC top-20 *Zagat* choice all attest to that. But the real secret to the Flay phenomenon isn't that he's the best or most groundbreaking in the is-that-really-food? sense of the term. It's that people like his cuisine and they like *him*. And perhaps even more important, they get the sense he likes them too.

Days of Wine and Roses

Anyone who knew Flay as a kid around 78th Street and 3rd Avenue on Manhattan's Upper East Side wouldn't be surprised in the least that he's grown up to love bright lights, beautiful women, fast horses and private planes. The allure of wine and roses was there from the start, from the first time his father took him to work at the legendary Theater District restaurant Joe Allen. The restaurant is still around, but back then, when his father, Bill, was a co-owner and New York had nowhere near as many restaurants it does today, it was one of the places that really mattered: a big, rollicking amber-lit joint with posters of noteworthy Broadway flops on the walls, chalkboards for menus and squadron of maître d's who always seemed to remember where you liked to sit and how you liked your drink (or made an excellent show of pretending to). "It was really a great place to learn," recalls Flay, who got his first job in the kitchen there, when he was 17. "It was all about Broadway. The waitstaff were actors trying to get work; the whole restaurant rotated around the theater schedule. I'm grounded in my kitchens — and that's the foundation where I started. I was a terrible student, so I didn't go to college. I had no interest. I wanted to work with my hands. And that's where I first got the chance."

Within a few years, Flay had moved on — to culinary school, then to a mentorship under Jonathan Waxman and eventually to open the original Mesa Grill on Fifth Avenue. But you could make

Flay's In-Flight Eats

When chef packs something to eat while leaving on a friend's jet-plane, he goes for something simple that holds moisture well — like this Mesa Grill classic.

STEAK WITH MESA STEAK SAUCE

SPICE RUB:

- 2 tablespoons ancho chile powder
- 1 tablespoon Spanish paprika
- 1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon dry mustard
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon ground coriander
- 1½ teaspoons dried oregano
- 1½ teaspoons ground cumin
- 1½ teaspoons chile de arbol

Combine all ingredients in a small bowl.

STEAK:

- 4 New York strip steaks, 12 ounces each
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Spice rub

1. Preheat grill or grill pan over medium-high heat. Brush both sides of the steaks with oil and season with salt and pepper. Rub one side of each steak with about two tablespoons of the rub.
2. Place the steaks on the grill/grill pan rub-side down and cook until lightly charred and a crust has formed, about 3–4 minutes. Flip the steaks over and continue grilling for 5–6 minutes more for medium-rare doneness. Spoon some of the Mesa Grill steak sauce into the center of the plate, place a steak on top and serve additional sauce on the side.
3. When on the plane, microwave until warm. Just 45–60 seconds.

MESA GRILL STEAK SAUCE:

- 1 cup ketchup
- ½ cup horseradish
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons maple syrup
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 tablespoons ancho chile powder
- Salt and freshly ground white pepper

1. Whisk together all ingredients in a small bowl until combined and season with salt and pepper.
2. Cover and refrigerate for at least one hour to allow flavors to meld. Bring to room temperature before serving. Serves 4.



the argument that Flay today — between the television shows, the three casino restaurants, the unwavering commitment to quality in an un-trendy cuisine — is still replicating the Joe Allen experience across a global, twenty-first-century stage.

TV has a funny effect on people. You've no doubt experienced the same thing yourself: You spend hours watching someone on the tube, and then one day you see that person on the street and want to go up and ask how his wife and kid are doing, share how much you loved it that time he frosted a wedding cake, how you once had a cake fall apart in your hands, too. You feel like you know the guy, in other words, and he knows you. That's just how Bobby Flay wants you to feel. He wants you to walk into his restaurants anywhere on earth and feel like you own the place. You belong. What's his is yours.

And any day now, you know what that's going to mean?
Jet privileges for the house! ■