

*The legendary skater draws on his Italian heritage to whip up dishes for his new cooking show on The Food Network.*

By Patricia Beemer

Photos courtesy of Linda Leaver

## *In the kitchen with* **Brian Boitano**

One could never accuse Brian Boitano of resting on his laurels.

In the 21 years since he gave his breathtaking performance at the 1988 Winter Olympic Games in Calgary, Canada, he has won 16 professional titles, won a prime-time Emmy award, become an ice-show impresario, penned an insider's guide to the world of competitive figure skating and founded a nonprofit organization.

At the age of 46, Boitano still works out every day and skates 16 hours a week, keeping himself in shape for the crowd-pleasing ice shows in which he still appears. "I pretty much work my butt off to do that. It's a hard road but I still love skating, so I keep plugging away." While his love for the sport continues unabated, he knows he won't be able to keep skating professionally forever. "I want to make sure that I get it all done when I want to do it," he explains, "because with skating, as soon as it's done, it's done."

Luckily, Boitano has a second calling: cooking. "It's another passion of mine," he says. "I've always loved the whole feeling of cooking for friends, entertaining—it's basically my lifestyle."

In his latest professional venture, Boitano trades in his skating blades for a chef's knife in the new Food Network show, *What Would Brian Boitano Make?* "The concept is really funny. We call it a reality docu-soap," he says with a laugh, "with great cooking." In each episode Boitano is challenged to devise and cook a festive meal for an occasion ranging from a surprise party for a new mother to a dinner for the local roller-derby squad. (So, what would Brian Boitano make for a bunch of bruiser bombshells? You'll have to tune in to find out, but word has it that those roller derby queens love their bacon.) True to form, Boitano makes a plan and follows through, devising creative menus, tooling



around San Francisco to find the best ingredients, and preparing one tempting meal after another in his own sunny kitchen.

The program also offers a glimpse of the rapport between Boitano and Linda Leaver, the woman who recognized his talent when he was only eight, coached him through his Olympic triumph and professional career, and continues as his manager today. They share a remarkable history and an appreciation for a good, silly laugh.

Of the pair's professional partnership, Boitano says, "It's been an amazing trip." Remembering how they met, he says, "It was my fifth group class and she was my teacher, and she asked my parents right after that if she could be my [private] teacher." After giving the boy his first private lesson, in which he amazed her by learning all the single jumps in one session, Linda Leaver went home to her husband and said, "I just taught a kid who's going to be a world champion."

When asked the secret to the pair's extraordinary professional relationship, Leaver says, "He's just one of the nicest human beings I've ever known." She points out that beyond his passion for cooking and entertaining, Boitano's high standards and persistence make him a perfect candidate for a cooking show. "You have to be so disciplined to do cooking or television work," she explains. "Sometimes you have to do a bazillion takes to get it just right."

Leaver says that the aspect of the show that has been most satisfying for Boitano has been the freedom to professionally indulge his sense of humor. People tend to think of Olympic champions as highly disciplined perfectionists, which Boitano is, but he also relishes the chance to have some light-hearted fun. "He's a very fun, funny person, and this show lets that come out."

*What Would Brian Boitano Make?* premiered on the Food Network on Sunday, August 23 at 1 p.m. ET/PT. “I’ve just got to say that I’m really pleased with it,” Boitano says of his newest project. “I think it’s really clever. It’s always been a dream of mine to be on the Food Network, so it’s pretty cool.”

The show’s title is a riff on *What Would Brian Boitano Do?*—a hyperbolic anthem of hero worship from the movie *South Park—Bigger, Longer and Uncut*, in which the show’s characters praise Boitano for such preposterous feats as fighting grizzly bears, beating up Kublai Khan and defeating an evil robot king. The song has so permeated today’s popular culture that Boitano has extraordinary name recognition among a generation born long after his Olympic exploits. While he has embraced the song (which took him by surprise) with his usual good-natured humor, Boitano is frequently perplexed by young fans of the cartoon, who seem unable to distinguish him from the crudely-animated superhero. (While he appreciates the positive attention, he’d love to get the bombastic song out of his head and really wishes people would stop playing it everywhere he shows up.) Such is the mutual admiration between Boitano and *South Park*’s creators, Matt Stone and Trey Parker, that Boitano wrote the foreword to the latest *South Park* book, “The *South Park* Guide to Life.”

As for his cooking technique, Boitano says, “I’m pretty much a self-taught cook. I do trial and error and try things over and over and over again, learning as I go.”

Not surprisingly, he credits his extended Italian family with inspiring his passion for cooking and entertaining. “It was my aunt who loved to entertain, who wanted people to eat, and my grandmother, who made her own ravioli by hand. I love Italian. I’m so connected to my Italian heritage.”

A couple of years ago, Boitano retraced his ancestral roots back to Favale di Malvaro, a rugged mountain village in Italy. “I usually spend a lot of the summers in Lucca, and I decided to go with a friend to find my family in the village outside of Chiavari, near Genoa. My brother had tracked down my ancestry, and had the family tree and the whole thing done. So we went to the village, just showed up at one in the afternoon. The first place we stopped was the church, to see the graveyard, and saw the Boitanos, and the other side of my family, named Cherugina.”

Favale, which remained unconnected by roads to the rest of Italy until well into the 1960s, is a grouping of little hamlets strung out in an area of rocky hillsides. Historically, each hamlet was populated by one of the local extended families, but since the mid-19th century, emigration has left many of the stone houses empty.

“We went into the bar, which was the only thing that was open,” he recalls. When Boitano’s Italian-speaking friend introduced him to the bartender, “the bartender said, ‘You want to meet other Boitanos? They’re in the back, playing cards!’”

Thus began a day of reconnecting with his ancestral homeland and his extended family. The town was abuzz with distant relatives thrilled to meet the Olympic champion. Boitano can’t help but laugh when he recalls one woman who told him, “I had a Boitano cousin who went to find you in San Francisco right after the Olympics, and he never found you!”

They were, of course, invited for dinner, and a distant cousin named Luciano asked if Boitano would like to see the home left behind by his emigrant ancestors. “I said, ‘absolutely.’ So we went to this little, teeny street. It was basically a little hamlet of Boitanos. It was so cute!” A young boy showed him an abandoned stone house and told him it was the home Boitano’s ancestors had left behind more than a century ago. When Boitano asked how he knew this, the boy replied that it was the only house that had been left by people who immigrated to the United States, rather than Peru or Argentina.

The proud Favalesi gave Boitano the full tour, including a look at the home left behind by the parents of A. P. Giannini, who founded Bank of America. “Their house has been turned into a museum, and it’s similar to what the Boitano house is, but the Boitanos’ house has trees growing out of the ceiling!”

As an extension of his love of heritage, Boitano has long enjoyed a warm relationship with the National Italian American Foundation. “Italian Americans are so supportive,” he says. “They’re just like a family; it’s an extended family.” He still relishes the memory of the night he received the NIAF Special Achievement Award in Sports at the annual gala in 1988. “Miss Liza Minnelli sang me ‘Happy Birthday’ that night!” he recalls with obvious delight. “It was amazing. It was my 25th birthday.”

Now, having shot the first four episodes of *What Would Brian Boitano Make?* Boitano is returning his full attention to the ice, where he is preparing for *The Brian Boitano Skating Spectacular*, which is slated to air on NBC on January 1. Produced by White Canvas Productions, which Boitano founded in 1995, the show will be the first of four planned for broadcast on NBC this year.

He also continues his enthusiastic participation in the activities of Youth Skate, the nonprofit organization he founded in 1998 to introduce the inner-city youth of San Francisco to ice skating. So far, more than 6,000 schoolchildren have been able to share in the joy of flying around the rink thanks to free instruction and skate time provided by the charity.

So, what will Brian Boitano do next? We’re pretty sure he won’t be retiring any time soon. “I get bored pretty easily!” he says with the *joie de vivre* of a man who’s always cooking up something new. ▲

