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KITCHEN CUT-UPS: Celebrity restaurateur Daniel Boulud, left, mixes it up with local chefs such as Grace restaurant's Neal Fraser in Season 2 of the Mojo HD series "After Hours With Daniel."

ON THE SET

Something's cooking in L.A.

By LYNN SMITH
Times Staff Writer

ON a late Sunday afternoon last summer, cameramen were setting up in a backroom of Grace restaurant on Beverly Boulevard while chef Neal Fraser sat on a bar stool feeling like he was coping with a case of nerves.

The restaurant, his very first, had been selected as one of 10 to be featured on the second, Los Angeles-based season of "After Hours With Daniel," a look at what happens when top chefs close down for the night and cook for one another.

Fraser had turned over the kitchen to the Mojo HD show's host, celebrity restaurateur Daniel Boulud, for a few hours. "To have one of the top three chefs in the world come into your restaurant is an honor," Fraser said. "I rank 197,000th."

Fraser, featured in tonight's episode at 9, said chefs in general share a relaxed camaraderie and that he had met Boulud — who won plaudits as the chef of Le Cirque in the '80s — in passing a

few times. "He's one of the guys who brought French cuisine as we know it today to New York City," added Fraser.

Boulud said he brought the show to Los Angeles because so many good restaurants have been opening up here. Since local chefs have yet to develop their own after-hours tradition, the evening's guests would come at a regular time. They would include Connie Britton, actress and a partner in the restaurant; Harry Shearer, actor and radio personality; Laurie Buckle, managing editor of Bon Appetit magazine; as well as chefs Fred Eric (Fred 62), Mike Wilson (Wilson Foodbar) and Warren Schwartz (Whist).

Boulud and Fraser had divided up the meal in advance. The French chef would make the sea urchin soup, Fraser the black bass and roasted piglet.

When they arrived, the lights and cameras turned on as they shared crab appetizers, a specialty-of-the-house cherry cocktail and small talk in a nook by the bar. Cries of "incredible" and "fabulous" greeted the first course, which resembled an ab-

stract painting of orange, red and black on a yellow plate. Wine all around.

"Mmm, so good," Britton complimented Fraser's deep-fried sea bass, stuffed with prawns, lobsters, mussels and clams. Boulud asked for seconds. More wine.

The main course, a farm-raised piglet from Bakersfield, brought an "Oh, yeah" from Shearer but silence and a pained expression from Britton. Boulud offered a toast to the pig.

Fraser said he thinks of his place as a cross between a neighborhood restaurant and a destination restaurant.

"People don't take restaurants as seriously in Los Angeles as they do in New York," he said. "If you spent \$70 on dinner in L.A., that's a lot of money. If you eat at a fine-dining restaurant in New York, it's \$200 a person and people wait months to get a 6 o'clock reservation. They say thank you. If you tell somebody in L.A. they can't get in at 7:30 on a Saturday night, they don't come in."

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