

Pressure-cooker kings

By JULIAN ARMSTRONG , Gazette Food Writer February 24, 2009



Deff Haupt, chef at Montreal's Restaurant Renoir, heats his corn gnocchi in a raclette unit at the Canadian Culinary championships in Banff last weekend. Sous-chefs Matthew Bilinski (left) and Julien Montagne observe.

Photograph by: Julian Armstrong, The Gazette



BANFF, ALTA. – A Japanese-born chef from the Calgary restaurant Catch has won the Canadian Culinary championships with his light cuisine with an Asian accent.

Hayato Okamitsu, competing against five chefs from across the country, beat Frank Pabst of Vancouver's Blue Water Café, who came second, and Montreal's Deff Haupt of Le Sofitel and Renoir restaurants, who placed third. The championships, organized by Gold Medal Plates, is expected to raise \$800,000 for Canadian Olympic athletes.

Okamitsu's final trio of tiny appetizers represented Canada coast to coast: Alberta beef ribs braised sukiyaki-style, Quebec duck foie gras cured with soy, and Nova Scotia lobster bisque decorated with a British Columbia shiso-scented spot prawn.

The six chefs, who won regional contests last fall, cooked almost non-stop for two days. It was like an Iron Chef scene as the chefs, each aided by one or two sous-chefs, had to turn out a stream of elaborate dishes.

Working against the clock, they created frantic scenes of chopping, sizzling and blending ingredients in the kitchens of the Banff Springs Hotel.

Spectators who paid to watch had to back into stoves and dodge decorated plates during the "black box" portion of the contest, which had the chefs turn out two entries in 50 minutes from a surprise collection of Alberta ingredients: pork loin, rainbow trout, Gouda cheese, rolled oats, carrots and Saskatoonberry syrup, which turned out to be sweet, red and somewhat like blueberry syrup.

One of the three challenges they faced was to produce a dish matched to a red wine they were allowed to taste but weren't given its name.

They had to shop for, cook and serve 235 guests for no more than \$350, or about \$1.50 a head.

Some of our panel of judges – myself and seven other food and wine writers or gastronomes from across the country – thought this budget-restricted contest was the toughest.

Some chefs made meatballs the centerpiece of their bargain dishes.

Pabst, of Vancouver, combined minced elk and pork shoulder with bacon and then wrapped the balls in Savoy cabbage leaves.

Patrick Lin of the Toronto restaurant Senses placed chunks of crabmeat in the centre of his pork meatballs, then set them on slabs of oyster mushroom and topped off his creation with a slice of honey-glazed bacon.

Bacon, paperthin and crisp, was balanced on many an entry, to the point where head judge James Chatto of Toronto Life magazine said, "Bacon is the new truffle."

Another popular topping was a crisp and lacy cheese biscuit balanced on meat or fish. Organic carrots turned into art when sliced in paperthin rounds and lined up on a fillet of trout, each carrot slice centred with a drop of bright red Saskatoonberry syrup. Quebec foie gras was almost a regular.

A unique trim was a crisp square of deep-fried trout skin, offered by Pabst as decor on oatmeal-coated and fried trout fillets.



The pressure of having to plan two dishes in 10 minutes, then cook them for the judges, pushed some chefs into the kind of over-drive they experience daily in their restaurants, but with several hundred paying spectators jamming the kitchen.

At the final contest, where the chefs had to serve 300 guests buffet-style, Charles Part of Les Fougères in Chelsea, in Quebec, representing the Ottawa-Gatineau region, attracted the biggest line-up. He served a whole Quebec moulard duck confit accented with a slice of pear filled with chèvre and served on rosti potatoes. Homey, but not elegant, our judging table agreed.

“That’s the cuisine we do,” was Part’s comment.

In between dishes with so many foods and seasonings that their busyness diminished their impact, two chefs kept to simplicity. One was David Cruz of Sage restaurant in Edmonton, who told me, over his tiny slices of charred flatiron Kobe-style beef steak with micro-greens and a shiitake sweet-and-sour sauce, that he agrees with London chef Gordon Ramsay that you should put no more than four foods on a plate. “We don’t hide behind ingredients,” he said.

The other entry that rated high for simplicity came from Montreal’s Haupt.

Competing in the “black box” portion, Haupt made one of his dishes by searing trout and serving it on a galette of grated potato and oat flakes. His second dish was roasted, sliced pork tenderloin stuffed with Gouda cheese and served with cumin-spiced carrots.

Each dish had a perfect, light, but richly flavoured sauce. After tucking into both of Haupt’s creations, even though we had been eating, arguing and judging for a couple of hours, Sid Cross, Vancouver gastronome and contest judge, asked: “Can I get a doggie bag for this?”

