

Harvest Fair food winners

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Is there one ultimate bite of food that encapsulates the bounty of Sonoma County?

This year, the top honor for appetizer in the Sonoma County Harvest Fair's food competition — the coveted Best of Show award — went to a simple slice of grilled lamb, topped with a petite sirah reduction sauce and a leek fondue.

"That just stole the show," Harvest Fair Food Judging Coordinator Anne Vercelli said of the dish, which also won Best Use of Sonoma County Lamb and Sonoma County Wine. "The lamb had a nice texture, and the sauce was really flavorful."

At the Sonoma County Harvest Fair Awards Night this Saturday night, local foodies can taste that luscious lamb dish created by chef/owner Chris Ludwick of Guerneville's Grapevine Catering Co. along with dozens of other award-winning appetizers, cakes and confections.

"I wanted to just keep it simple and bring out the natural flavor of the lamb," Ludwick said of his award-winning dish. "I love the flavor of the local lamb."

This year's appetizer contest lured a record-breaking total of 124 entries from 26 restaurants and catering companies. According to Vercelli, the competition was especially fierce in the seafood and vegetable categories.

"We're seeing lots of portobello mushrooms, beets, beans and tomatoes," said Vercelli. "In seafood, we're seeing shrimp, crab, sea bass, oyster, cod, scallops and snapper."



JEFF KAN LEE / The Press Democrat
Best of Show-winning dish by Chris Ludwick was grilled lamb napped with a petite sirah reduction sauce and a leek fondue.

To judge the appetizers, Vercelli gathered a panel of eight culinary professionals from across the county, including restaurant, winery and catering chefs from Sonoma to Geyserville. The judging took place in the Showcase Cafe at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds.

Sound like an easy job? Guess again. Each judge must taste a minimum 40 to 45 appetizers each, with only an occasional sip of water or wine to cleanse their palates.

And although they were divided into three panels — one for cold appetizers, one for meat, and one for seafood, veggies and starches — the judges had to jump nimbly among different flavors, going from ceviche and coconut shrimp to risotto and polenta gratin . . . and back again.

“This is not for amateurs,” said Jeff Young, executive chef for Alexander Valley Vineyards in Healdsburg, about halfway through the six-hour appetizer judging.

“It’s like the Fancy Food Show in San Francisco,” said Franco Dunn, consulting chef for Santi in Geyserville. “You start with a donut, yogurt, cheese and chocolate, then you start all over again. It’s a mishmash.”

The dishes that rose to the top were the ones, like Ludwick’s lamb, that boldly set out in one direction and stayed the course.

“I think sometimes the chefs try too hard,” said John Vrattos of Santa Rosa, a Colombo bread food service accounts manager. “Look what restaurants really stay open and stay successful . . . it’s the guys that keep it simple.”

Steve Garner, co-host of KSRO’s “The Good Food Hour” with John Ash, concurred. “People try too hard and put in too many ingredients,” he said.

Mike Matson, of Vintage Valley Catering in Healdsburg, noted that when chefs have a passion for cooking, it really showed through in their dishes.

“If you’re a foodie, everything comes naturally,” he said. “I look for proper balance, acidity and proper seasoning.”

In the competition, the appetizers were judged equally on appearance and flavor — 40 percent for each — with 20 percent of the score based on originality.

During the competition, kitchen volunteer Claudia Oseguera helped coordinate the competing chefs, who were given time slots throughout the day to finish off their dishes in the kitchen.

Oseguera checked each plate of food, wrote the name of the dish on a tag, then whisked the appetizers out to the judges. Her job was as rewarding as it was demanding.

“This is so fun,” she said. “It’s like getting to go to a restaurant . . . without going to it. And the chefs work so hard.”

The volunteer judges also worked hard, powering through the smorgasbord of small plates in search of that ultimate bite — the best-looking, best-tasting appetizer of all.

One of the trends the judges noticed was the preponderance of local foods, from olive oil and meat to fruits and vegetables.

“This year, we’re getting local pork and beef from Sonoma County,” Garner said. “You would never have seen that 10 or 12 years ago.”

At Grapevine Catering Co., Chris Ludwick said he keeps his menus as local as possible. “We’re very seasonal in what we do,” he said. “And we take a lot of care and pride in our sauces.”

A graduate of the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, Ludwick worked for various chefs in the Bay Area, then started his own business in 2002 on a bucolic stretch of Highway 116 just outside Guerneville.

He runs Grapevine Catering with his wife, Amy, and works all over the Bay Area, serving as resident chef for Flora Springs Winery in St. Helena, Yacht Connections International in San Francisco and Ramekins in Sonoma.

Last year, the North Carolina native won two top awards at the Harvest Fair competition — Best Use of Sonoma County Seafood and Sonoma County Wine — for his Creamy Corn Grits with Roasted Prawns. That traditional Southern dish was given a twist with a splash of wine.

“I always try to include some of the wine into the dish,” he said of his pairing philosophy. “It’s a bridge to flavor.”

Here are the other top award winners in the appetizer category at the fair’s professional food competition:

Best Use of Sonoma County Cheese — Crudo Frog Hollow Peach with Bellwether Ricotta by Pacific Markets of Rohnert Park, Santa Rosa and Sebastopol.

Best Use of Sonoma County Beef — Bourbon Braised Beef Short Ribs by the Doubletree Hotel of Rohnert Park.

Best Use of Sonoma County Poultry — Killer Egg Rolls by Tex Wasabi’s of Santa Rosa.

Best Use of Sonoma County Seafood — Red Snapper Ceviche with Pico de Gallo by A La Heart Catering in Santa Rosa.

Best Use of Sonoma County Vegetables — Mushroom Flan by the Fountaingrove Golf Club in Santa Rosa

Best Use of a Corn Tortilla — Savory Locally farmed Pork by Out to Lunch Catering of Petaluma

Best Use of Olive Oil — Feta Herb Cheese by A La Heart Catering of Santa Rosa.

Sweepstake Appetizer Exhibitor, for overall points earned: A La Heart Catering of Santa Rosa
