

February 12 Chefs Challenge

Daniel Wright, Tomato Jam Café

April Moon Harper, Sunny Point Café

And the 2013 Chefs Challenge Begins!

The first WNC Chefs Challenge of 2013 was a night of firsts: the first time flour has been featured as a secret ingredient, the first time chefs weren't allowed to bring their own ingredients or equipment, the first time diners got to see the full menu before the festivities began, the first time competitor Daniel Wright of Tomato Jam Café ever made hard candy, and the first time culinary students from Eliada School of Trade Arts' (ESTA) inaugural class got to help out in the kitchen. Eliada Homes is this year's nonprofit beneficiary. But wait, there's one more first: the first time the event was held at Chestnut, since it is, after all, one of Asheville's newest restaurants. Let's start with the first first: Flour.

Of course, we're not talking just regular, plain, white multi-purpose flour. The night's secret ingredient was North Carolina-grown whole wheat Carolina Ground flour, purchased through the North Carolina Organic Bread Flour Project. What's more, the two featured flour varieties were virtually unheard of throughout the audience and were even novel to the three judges: whole wheat crema flour and whole wheat polenta. I know what you're thinking: "But polenta is corn!" As event emcee Bob Bowles explained, polenta actually has to do with the mids, a technical term for a grain mill product that's not yet a flour. And what about crema? It's called such because it's extremely refined, which gives it a texture almost like, you guessed it, cream. Bowles advises that if you intend to do some Googling to learn more, start with "00 flour."

Both team Tomato Jam and team Sunny Point had the same idea when it came to the wheat polenta: "grit" cakes. "When you have an ingredient that's kind of odd, it seems to spur the same thing," chef Harper said of their similar approach. Team Tomato Jam topped their grit cake with pan-seared trout and a pork belly vinaigrette, which was voted the number one dish of the night. Team Sunny Point served theirs with brown butter jalapeno seared salmon, a tasso green bean salad, and a creamy crayfish Lusty Monk Mustard sauce.

It's that local Lusty Monk concoction that made Chef Wright "sauce jealous" and convinced him to add a last-minute pineapple sauce to the number two dish: grilled pineapple cheesecake with a crema wheat crust served with whipped cream and that first-time pomegranate hard candy.

For dessert, team Sunny Point countered with an apple and purple sweet potato tart topped with a refreshingly sweet local Haw Creek Honey vanilla ice cream and garnished with pork belly cracklings. What about the secret ingredient? To honor another first and give a nod to the night's host, Chef Harper incorporated chestnut flour into the crema for the tart's dough.

Chef Joe Scully—Chestnut co-owner—served as the event’s “chef referee,” although there were no scuffles to break up. “It’s about camaraderie, food, fellowship,” he remarked. In other words, Chestnut is ready for seconds. The second round takes place on Tuesday, February 19, between Chef Dan Moore of Double Tree Catering and Chef Edwin French of Pack’s Tavern.

Speaking of seconds, it was a close contest, but team Tomato Jam Cafe prevailed as the winner. They’ll be back and ready for a second go soon. It should be noted that diners were ready for seconds, too, eagerly boxing up any leftovers.

For more information about the Asheville Wine & Food Festival and WNC Chefs Challenge, visit www.ashevillewineandfood.com.

February 12 Menu

Team Tomato Jam

- Cream of wheat polenta grit cake with pan-seared trout in a pork belly vinaigrette
- Braised strip loin pot pie in a sweet potato herbed crema flour pastry shell
- Grilled pineapple cheesecake with a crema wheat crust served with whipped cream and pomegranate candy

Team Sunny Point Cafe

- Blue cheese crema bread flour crackers garnished with warm smoked duck breast and a fennel beet carpaccio
- Brown butter jalapeño seared salmon with a creamy crayfish Lusty Monk Mustard sauce served over a polenta cream of wheat cake with a tasso green bean salad
- Apple and purple sweet potato tart with chestnut crema bread tart dough topped with a Haw Creek Honey vanilla ice cream and garnished with pork belly cracklings

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