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National chefs compete in South Bend for chance in Spain

By Joseph Dits South Bend Tribune



Chef Thomas Moran puts the finishing touches on a dish during the Food Summit cooking competition Wednesday at the Hilton Garden Inn and Gillespie Conference Center in South Bend.

Tribune Photo/MICHAEL CATERINA

SOUTH BEND -- Chef Patrick Popores picked wild sea grapes in Florida, where he lives now, and had the tree-grown fruit shipped to South Bend on ice. Once here, he squeezed the not-yet-ripe juice for a citrus flavor on roasted and seared octopus.

A trip to Spain was on the line: the World Tapas Championship. Seven other chefs from around the country were filling a room Wednesday in the Hilton Garden Inn and Gillespie Conference Center with smoky, savory aromas.

Judging his work, chef Norman Van Aken, praised him for infusing the cuisine with local Florida flavors.

“A lot of times, chefs forget where they live,” said Van Aken, a noted author and chef who’s won the James Beard Award. “This gives me optimism for the future of hotel dining.”

“I hope more people step out of their back door and use things around them,” Popores added. “The greatest things are created by nature.”

Out of more than 250 executive chefs who work for the 540 sites managed by Interstate Hotels and Resorts, including this one, 20 were chosen for a competition in Chicago. Then there were eight. They came here to decide who will go to the World Tapas Championship, with one chef each from 50 countries, the brainchild of Fernando Salazar, who’d started it 12 years ago for students.

The event in Valladolid, Spain, became so popular that, starting last year, it was for the pros, said Salazar, who was among seven judges on Wednesday. He works out of Dallas as senior vice president of food and beverage for Interstate.

Why hold the U.S. finale here? Salazar said it pays tribute to the local Holladay Properties, which came up with the idea for a competition among chefs in the local hotels it owns. He said he “stole the idea” and made it national.

The chefs spent three days here, fixing their dishes for Salazar and Van Aken, who praised them for using feedback to tweak the food.

“I came for the experience, meeting the chefs, the exchange,” said chef Ryan Ward, working in Sarasota, Fla., who made blackened halibut with succotash, a nod to vegetables grown in his native Maine. “I came away with a lot of ideas.”

The winner, going to Spain, is Gregory McGowan, who created snapper tiradito and a slow-cooked prime center cut filet. The Connecticut native, now in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., said he poured passion into it. Van Aken said he tasted a lot of Peruvian and Latin flavor, getting this dish “beyond the average hotel buffet meal.”

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