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Chefs go head-to-head in tense cook-off

"How much time have I got left?" the chefs nervously asked as they listened to the clock ticking away next to them at Bermuda's live cook off.

Tension filled the room as four of Bermuda's top chefs went head-to-head as part of the Bermuda Gourmet Getaway.

They knew every second counted as they competed for the all-important title of Bermuda's best chef at the latest qualifier of the Escoffier Cup 2008.

Some chefs looked quite red-faced as they sweated out the nerves, while others looked as cool as ice and took the challenge in their stride.

But they had nowhere to hide as every move was watched by the 30 wannabe food and wine connoisseurs squashed into the small and smoky demo kitchen at International Imports on Par-La-Ville Road. The chefs stood at the foot of a huge wooden table as they chopped, stirred and seasoned their way through their own creations.

There was no room for mistakes as the audience had the benefit of a huge mirror on the kitchen's ceiling to add to their view. The emcee, executive chef John Pritchard, also provided a running commentary telling the audience what the chefs were doing and why they were doing it.

But there was no cheering and no words of encouragement from the audience. A couple of chefs tried cracking a few jokes to lighten the mood, but most of them made the most of the complete silence to concentrate.

The chosen protein of the night was Hormel Foods pork tenderloin and that's just about all the help they were given. Everything else was down to the individual chefs who brought along their own recipes, as well as food and cooking utensils.

The only time you heard the audience was when they took it upon themselves to do a five second count down at the end of each chef's allocated time.

Each chef had just 25 minutes to whip up three portions of their recipe, plus an additional 5 minutes plating time, and they each brought something completely different to the table.

They were scored on hygiene, presentation, ingredients and taste by the three eagle-eyed judges; Fred Ming, professional American Culinary Federation certified chef, Ellis Frazzioni of Gosling's and Anthony McMahon, the chef from Royal Bermuda Yacht Club.

As if that wasn't enough the chefs also had to impress the hungry members of the audience who also became judges for the night with their pens and score sheets.

Chef Charles Dwan from the Pickled Onion kicked things off and had his work cut out as he prepared a trio of pork tenderloin. He trimmed pork into thin slices and dredged them in walnut flour ready to be pan fried, seasoned pork with wild mushroom bread pudding and pecan and paprika butter and hot smoked pork with his own chilli honey coleslaw and mustard BBQ.

At times Chef Dwan looked a little red-faced and nervous under the pressure, but proudly said "I'm done" with a few minutes left on the clock.

Next up was Vinay Racharla from Elbow Beach who confidently talked the audience through what he was doing and made everything look so easy. He seemed to do five jobs at once as he cooked the lentils and chorizo cassoulet, stirred his cinnamon honey butternut puree, as well as

his apple and lime chutney, and poached his pork tenderloin.

Chef Racharla perfected what looked like a perfectly rehearsed routine as he had everything timed perfectly right down to the last second. It was left to his friends in the audience to do the worrying for him as they reassured one another and said: "He's okay, he's on time."

Timothy Palmer of Bacci had a look of concentration fixed on his face as he calmly juggled the four or five pans he had on the stove. Nothing seemed to phase him as he proudly commented 'Mmmm' and 'Smells good.' Even when he was told how much time he had left, he always responded with a polite 'beautiful.'

Chef Palmer seasoned and roasted the pork tenderloin, made the apple and sage sausage from scratch and whipped up the cider jus, organic carrots, fresh king porcini and loquat chutney like it was no trouble at all.

Last but not least was Peter Campagna from Café Coco who looked the part as he worked with a tea-towel over his shoulder. He also had plenty of charisma as he chatted away to the audience, calling the pork "his baby that was right where he wanted it."

Chef Campagna produced wonders with the help of a food processor as he overlapped the tenderloin in his walnut and lemon breadcrumb crust and diced potatoes and caramelized the bacon.

Competition was tough but it was Chef Palmer who won the hearts of judges and walked off as the proud pork tenderloin winner.

He will now compete head-to-head with the other three winners from the qualifiers at the Village at the Fairmont Southampton Resort on Sunday, March 2. The overall winner -aka Bermuda's best chef - will win a trip to New York City. Last year's winner was Terry Clark of the Seahorse Grill.

Want to go to this week's cook-off?

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The last qualifier of the Escoffier Cup 2008 takes place tomorrow (Thursday) at 6pm at International Imports. The chosen protein will be certified Angus beef strip loin. Tickets are \$75 and available at International Imports. Proceeds go to Friends of Hospice and the Bermuda Culinary Development Fund.

The Escoffier Cup is part of the fifth annual Bermuda Gourmet Getaway, which takes place February 28 to March 3. It will feature many overseas chefs and will be hosted by chef Rahman "Rock" Harper, who won the TV series Hell's Kitchen.

For information about other events taking place visit www.bermudagourmetgetaway.bm or contact Michelle Halpin at 278-8895 or email Michelle@totalgroup.bm. Tickets are available at www.boxoffice.bm

Who cooked what?

Charles Dwan, Pickled Onion - Trio of pork tenderloin, walnut crusted, pan fried with wild mushroom bread pudding and hot smoked with chilli honey coleslaw and mustard.

Vinay Racharla, Elbow Beach - Roasted pork tenderloin with green lentils and chorizo

cassoulet, cinnamon honey butternut puree, apple chutney and calvados jus.

Timothy Palmer, Bacci - Pork two ways, with apple and sage sausage and quail egg.

Peter Campagna, Café Coco - Double crusted pork tenderloin, pickled squash and smoked bacon jus.

Who has already won -

Week one - Duck - Michael Gomes (Cafe Coco)

Week two - Scallops - Rajander Singh Bhandari (Cafe Coco)

Escoffier Cup cooking tips

Everything in the kitchen is a tool.

Use colour-coded utensils for different raw materials.

Do not throw away any food - everything can be used in the kitchen.

Use pastry cutters as food molds.

When it comes to pork, the belly has the fat and the shoulder is more flavourful.

Covering meat in cling film will keep it intact as it is cut.

Chefs should continually taste their food.

Wiping the plate to ensure perfect presentation is the last thing any chef should do.