

October 17th, 2014 By Kristen Franke | Food & Drink | Posted In: Alcohol, Beer, Cincinnati, Events, Food news, Food art

The Palace's Chef Joe West Wins CityBeat's Iron Fork

While attendees ate and drank at Moerlein's brewery space



Jose Salazar plates a dish at Iron Fork - Photo: CityBeat

Wednesday, Oct. 15, kicked off *CityBeat's* maiden voyage for Iron Cincinnati, a *Iron Chef*-esque cooking competition complete with chefs from around the city, closed-circuit television and, of course, plenty of food and drink to keep the attendees happy and buzzed.

The event, which raised money for local nonprofit **Gabriel's Place** a Junior Culinary Institute, took place at the Christian Moerlein brewer Over-the-Rhine. The restaurants represented (**Jimmy G's**, **Django Western Taco**, **LaLa's Blissful Bites**, **Invito Chef**, **El Rancho Grande BBQ**, **Redondo Taqueria**, **Axis Alley on the Levee**, **Seasons 52**, **Sil Ladle**, **Elephant Walk Injera & Curry House**, **Washington Platform**, **O'Malley's in the Alley**, **Mazzaro's Place**, **The Pub**, **Boswell Alley** and

Moerlein Lager House) each provided a small sample of their favorite items for attendees to nibble on, from mini-steak sandwiches to shot glass-sized pecan pie. Some of the vendors were parked in the more polished taproom, while the majority of the booths and the competition itself appeared in the "basement chic" room next door. Attendees wandered from booth to booth, balancing small plates and frothy cups of Moerlein beer as they waited for the main event to begin. Everyone looked slightly confused at first, but it didn't take long for everyone to catch on and figure out where to go — the Four Roses bourbon and cider probably helped.

Iron Fork's version of Kitchen Stadium was a small-ish cooking space set up at one end of the very large room. It was fully stocked with brightly colored produce from **SYSCO**, plenty of spices, gas burners and shiny stainless steel cookware from **Cooks'Wares**. Scattered across the room were large TVs (not in HD, our spoiled selves lamented) for those who may not be able to find a spot in the small area in front of the kitchen to watch the action. The three judges were perched to the left of the kitchen, presumably starving.

Frances Kroner of **Sleepy Bee**, Jose Salazar of **Salazar** and Joe West of **The Palace at The Cincinnati** were the three chosen to appear for the event. Each of them had one hour to create a dish using the elusive secret ingredient: figs. (Most of the crowd had left before the secret was revealed; it had to remain a secret to make the competition fair for everyone.) Each chef also had a Junior Culinary Institute student from Gabriel's Place on their team; all three of the students, it must be said, were incredibly impressive in their professionalism and skill.

The hour-long cooking time per chef allowed attendees to continue to wander and stuff their faces with local treats. The amount of sweet options seemed high (possibly because it was hard to locate the free water to cleanse your palate). The line never seemed to shorten, which was fine. If anything, it allowed for more socializing with the other food enthusiasts. Watching the cooking itself was only really entertaining near the end of the hour-long time limit — Jose Salazar straight up walked to the judges' table with his dishes at the end, and that's just good TV.

Once each chef's segment was complete and the three judges were served, a fourth dish was auctioned off to a lucky audience member. (Frances Kroner's dish went for a whopping \$150.)

"All the chefs did a great job and we had a lot of fun sharing our thoughts and our food with the crowd," says judge and *CityBeat* food writer Anne Mitchell. "Frannie Kroner's lamb chop entree was wonderful, and (Ilene Ross, *CityBeat* food writer and judge) had a great idea — she added one of her lamb chops to the auction for Gabriel's Place."

"I ate all three of mine and gnawed the bones clean, so that shows you where my heart resides," she continues, laughing. "Jose's appetizer, lamb tartare, was amazing. Ilene licked her plate. It was the kind of dish that separates ordinary food from art."

The audience did not hear from the judges until the end, when they named The Palace's Joe West as the winner for his appetizer and entree dishes.

"Joe West's appetizer and entree blew us away," says Mitchell. "The scallop crudo was another work of art, and it was the perfect starter for Joe's main dish. I wish I could be 100 percent sure of the description but things got a little crazy at the end and we really didn't hear what Joe said, but I think it was halibut in veloute sauce with bacon crumbles for a garnish, flash potato 'chips' from tiny fingerling potatoes and the figs."

"Figs were the 'secret ingredient' that all the chefs had to incorporate into their dishes," she continues. "It would have been nice to see them utilized a little more essentially in the dishes instead of used as a (yummy) garnish, but that seems a little like splitting hairs."

Overall, the event's first run was a success. Did I want to snag one of Kroner's scallops or a bite of Salazar's lamb tartar off the judges' table? Sure. But I didn't, and it still turned out to be a nice little Wednesday night.