

Published February 9, 2009

Gumbofest draws 13 competing chefs

By HEATHER ROTH Staff Writer

The secret to a perfect gumbo? It lies in the roux.

Chefs and aficionados alike claim that the roux, made from butter and flour and slow-roasted to dark perfection to thicken the stock, can make - or destroy - a gumbo. "You have to have a deep, brown, rich roux. You have to cook it a long time, that is the secret," said Mike St. Ledger of Kent Island, a retired chef and gumbo enthusiast, while attending the 10th annual Gumbofest yesterday afternoon at the Annapolis Marriott Waterfront hotel.

Sponsored by the Chesapeake Chefs Association, the Gumbofest gave 13 area chefs a chance to showcase their gumbo recipes.

"It's a great time with the family, we bring the kids," St. Ledger said. He was wearing the traditional Mardi Gras pointed hat and strings of beads. St. Ledger has brought his family every year since the annual fundraiser began. His two sons enjoyed gathering beaded necklaces and sampled the gumbo varieties. "I like all of the texture and flavor that they put into (the gumbo)," said 8-year-old Michael St. Ledger, a third-grader at Bayside Elementary School in Stevensville.

Around 400 people gathered in the Marriott's huge ballroom, with the crowd spilling out onto the patio overlooking the Annapolis Harbor. Some danced to the music of local band Mama Jama, while others compared their favorite gumbo samples. For Denise Pullet of Laurel - a native of Baton Rouge, La. - it was a taste of home. "We're not at home for Mardi Gras (this year)," she said. "This is how we do it at home." After sampling about half of the 13 offerings, she hadn't found the perfect one.

While each chef said a good gumbo begins in the roux, each had his own way to make the rich soup. James Eriksen, executive chef at Pusser's Caribbean Grille in the Marriott, has won either a first- or



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LEFT: Claudia Trauger, age 11, serves some gumbo at the Wild Orchid restaurant table.

RIGHT: Michael St. Ledger, 8, licks his spoon after finishing a sample of gumbo. He spent much of the afternoon collecting beaded Mardi Gras necklaces.

second-place award for his seafood gumbos for the past nine years. His secret? The way he prepares the seafood. He fries the seafood separately from the gumbo and adds it at the end, so that the flavors stay distinct. "It makes a big difference to make the seafood separately," he said.

Eriksen was dressed in overalls and a Hawaiian shirt and bedecked in Mardi Gras beads. He and his associate spent much of the afternoon calling visitors over to their corner table. "Hot, fresh gumbo, over here," they barked. Attendees came calling and eventually voted Pusser's second place in the People's Choice Award category.

Christopher Roy, executive sous-chef of the Fisherman's Inn in Grasonville, made 15 gallons of gumbo for the competition. "I just take time (making it)," he said. "It has to set. Leftovers always taste better." Fisherman's Inn took third place in both the People's Choice and Judge's Choice categories.

Taking first place in the People's Choice category and winning "best booth" was the Annapolis Doubletree Hotel, where executive chef Charles McKnew runs the Port of Call restaurant. The secret, he said, is "a great stock, thickened with a great roux." His booth was decorated with watermelon carvings by chef Jamie Evans. Watermelon rinds were carved into Mardi Gras masks with huge smiles, detailed shadings and intricate flowers. "I've been drawing all my life," Evans said. "I taught myself."

One of the favorites of the crowd -- and first-place winner of the Judge's Choice Award -- was the Hospitality Culinary Arts and Tourism Institute at Anne Arundel Community College. "Whenever we finished (making the gumbo), I said no matter what happens, we know we made great gumbo," said chef and instructor John Johnson. The students spent hours roasting the roux and cold-smoking their own sausage, then let the flavors settle. "The secret to ours is we made our own andouille sausage," Johnson said. "A good gumbo should always sit overnight." Paul's Homewood Cafe in Annapolis also won an award, taking second in the Judge's Choice category.

The Gumbofest is held annually to raise funds for a local nonprofit group. This year, it raised \$4,000 for the Light House Shelter in Annapolis.

"It's going to go to the operating expenses," said Pat Prouty, who serves on the board of Friends of the Light House Shelter and worked with the Chefs Association to organize yesterday's event. "The Light House Shelter really depends on the kindness of others, especially in these times," she said. The event has benefited other local charities in the past, but the Chefs Association has a special relationship with the shelter, which aids the homeless. The association already hosts the Bountiful Harvest fundraiser for the shelter each fall.

"We go from year to year. If I had to guess, we'll stick with the Lighthouse Shelter," said Pat Ernst, who coordinates the charity work for the association. "They've been great to work with." The Gumbofest always is held the weekend after the Super Bowl, Ernst said, though it rotates between different venues. "There's quite a bit of work, but we get better each year," he said.