

## Pasadena Culinary Team Slices Up The Competition At Mason Dixon Master Chef Tournament



By Zach Sparks, August 26, 2015

They each have different backgrounds - Jirat Suphrom-in, the executive chef from Pasadena who excels in Thai cuisine; Zach LeDoux, an Italian connoisseur from Pasadena who studied at Anne Arundel Community College (AACC); and Martha Walton, the AACC student and Gibson Island baker – but together, the team from Baltimore’s My Thai restaurant beat 15 competitors from Maryland and Washington, D.C., to win the prestigious Mason Dixon Master Chef Tournament on August 16 at the Inn at the Colonnade Baltimore.

Team My Thai defeated Colony South Hotel of Clinton, Maryland, to win its fourth and final culinary battle. The bracket-style tournament started on June 15, and during each round, contestants prepared an appetizer, an entrée and a dessert.

During the final match, both teams were asked to cook dishes with a theme of avant garde – creating something new and innovative. For the appetizer, Suphrom-in and LeDoux pressure cooked squab in a

spicy tom yum soup, and served it with yum yum sauce, a green yum sauce and a zesty and sour lime yum sauce. They named their creation “50 shades of yum,” as a playful nod to Thai culture, which has numerous foods that contain the word “yum.”

Pheasant breast was the meat they were given for the entrée, so the two male chefs stuffed it with onions, peppers and other spices, and they cooked it in a basil Thai chili sauce.

“We couldn’t overcook or undercook [the pheasant], and it was pretty hard meat to work with,” said Suphrom-in, who trained under chefs Mark Morgan and Jimmy Hall at Two Rivers Steak & Fish House. “We spent time trying different things. We used all this experience we had . . . and it turned out pretty well.”

For a side, they made jasmine rice cooked with the two secret ingredients — blue cheese and fontina cheese — and made an herb salad smothered in carrot ginger dressing and topped with deep-fried quail egg in a fried noodle nest.

For the dessert, Walton created an edible mojito. “A mojito is typically a drink, and so I took the flavors of the mojito and turned it into a jelly with Malibu rum, lime juice and mint leaves,” Walton explained. “One of our secret ingredients was Pop Rocks, so I coated the Pop Rocks in white chocolate so they would still pop and I suspended them in the jelly.

“As you ate this mojito-flavored jelly, it still fizzed like a typical mojito would do if you were drinking it,” she continued. “I paired it with a cherry balsamic compote that had real cherries and almonds in it, and on top of that, I did a cherry balsamic meringue rose, because balsamic was one of the secret ingredients we had to use. So it was a spin-off of something old and new, and we presented it in a nice way.”

When it came time for the winning announcement, the My Thai and Colony South Hotel teams both thought they had lost because the judges were harsh. My Thai won by two points.

“When we won, it was breathtaking,” LeDoux said. “They played our music to announce who the winner was. And it went on for a few seconds, and we all looked up at each other and said, ‘Oh my God. We just won.’ And we started jumping up and down and screaming. It was euphoric. It was a pretty intense feeling and I’m proud of my team.”

Mitchell Platt, one of three judges of the final match and general manager of Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., said the team showed a humble confidence and willingness to adapt.

“The My Thai team distinguished themselves with their innovative cooking styles, precise presentations and outstanding flavors and tastes of their dishes,” Platt said. “The team exhibited a passion for excellence, and they really enjoyed working together. I also enjoyed their youthful exuberance; they were engaging. They also learned from the early rounds of the competition, always taking to heart the suggestions from the panel of judges.”

During those early rounds, they created some of their favorite dishes. LeDoux’s favorite moment came in the second round, when the team made pressure-cooked lamb shank and cooked it in a Thai beer. They

paired it with a spicy mango salad and a rice cake. Walton's highlight was during the first round. "I actually turned ice cream on dry ice," Walton recalled. "That one was pretty darn cool."

But even though they enjoyed the learning experience, they were faced with several challenges, including a limited number of burner tops and a short amount of time to practice cooking with their ingredients before each round.

"We had to practice for the competition we had, whether it be four weeks, two weeks or three days one time," LeDoux said. "We had a restaurant that we were trying to run in the meantime, so inventing recipes and practicing them while we're cooking on our busiest days was a hard point."

As the winning team, My Thai received \$1,000 cash, a two-day all-expense-paid trip to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and other culinary prizes. The experience also came with other perks. Suphrom-in will soon fly to California to shoot an episode of the Food Network series "Chopped."

"I have to say I have a great team and they have been really on point," Suphrom-in emphasized. "They help a lot and they know what they're doing. Whatever they do, I trust them, and that's what the team needs, to trust one another." - See more at: <http://www.pasadenavoice.com/school-youth/pasadena-culinary-team-slices-competition-mason-dixon-master-chef-tournament#sthash.fh04Lcrt.dpuf>