



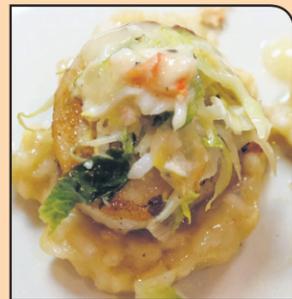
A cut above

Gratzi chef Nick Watts, right, prepares his toasted pistachio and ricotta gnocchi dish during Mainstreet Ventures' Top Knife competition at Zia's.

BLADE PHOTOS BY LORI KING



TOP: Kale and cream cheese stuffed pork chop dish by Zia's Brittney Hagan



RIGHT: Seared sea scallops by Stillwater Grill chef Tim Nuckels

BELOW: Seared scallops by Palio's Adam Cane



Talented chefs face off at Top Knife competition



Lobster mac and cheese by chef Aaron Musinski of Real Seafood Company in Bay City, Mich.



A seared Chilean seabass prepared by Gratzi chef and 2018 Top Knife winner Dan Gawura



Chef Gawura, right, is named the winner of Mainstreet Ventures' Top Knife competition by Mainstreet President and CEO Mike Gibbons.

By MARY BILYEU
BLADE FOOD EDITOR

Top Knife is "the dinner of the year," said Mainstreet Ventures President and CEO Mike Gibbons in his introduction to the event. Eight of the restaurant group's establishments had hosted internal cook-offs, and those winners competed in the finals last month at Zia's in Toledo.

Father Joe Newman, vice president at St. Francis de Sales School, called the competition one of his favorite events because it's "in support of charity." Nearly 80 attendees paid \$100 each to serve as judges; 20 percent of the proceeds benefit Tutor Smart, a Toledo Public Schools after-hours program.

Tim Nuckels, chef at the Stillwater Grill in Brighton, Mich., led off with seared scallops served over creamy risotto. Bonnie Hunter noted the lovely tenderness of the seafood.

Aaron Musinski, chef at Bay City, Mich.'s, Real Seafood Company, served his lobster mac and cheese in the shell, eliciting gasps. "I thought this presentation was just fantastic," said Father Ronald Olszewski, also of St. Francis de Sales.

Sous chef Nick Watts of Ann Arbor's Gratzi offered rustic ricotta gnocchi with roasted carrots and a maple-bourbon-cherry gastrique, which was Nancy Flynn's favorite dish.

Bob Bolling, a bartender and dining room supervisor at Carson's American Bistro, also in Ann Arbor, prepared a fragrant Moroccan-spiced lamb with roasted root vegetables. "That was really something," said Jim Slattery.

And Dakota Hughes, a line cook at the Stillwater Grill in Okemos, Mich., served the final competitive dish: a pan-seared filet basted in garlic butter, with rosemary mashed potatoes and ratatouille. It appeared to be simple but offered complex flavors.

Dessert was prepared by Taylor Hoener, a bartender and dining room supervisor at Palio in Grand Rapids, Mich., who served a meringue and buttercream tower garnished with gleaming spun sugar.

And then, the winners were announced. Third place, with a prize of \$750, went to Brittney Hagan, a server and bartender at Zia's, for her kale and cream cheese-stuffed pork chop topped with apple carrot slaw. Many judges described it as "gorgeous."

Adam Cane, the dining room manager at Palio in Ann Arbor, earned the \$1,000 second prize for scallops served with freshly prepared spaghetti. The egg perched on top had been poached perfectly, with the runny yolk enriching the sauce. Pat Flynn said, "They hit a home run."

And the Top Knife winner — who earned \$1,500, a chef's knife, and the opportunity to have his dish placed on Mainstreet Ventures' menus — was Dan Gawura, the executive chef at Ann Arbor's Gratzi.

"Everyone's dishes looked so amazing," he said, shocked that he'd won. He hadn't originally planned to compete, but his staff encouraged him; they even helped to pick the ingredients for his meltingly tender Chilean sea bass atop a crispy fried risotto cake and complemented by a roasted tomato broth.

The quality "gets better every year," said Brent Courson, MSV executive chef. "The event, for us, is a focus on people who are truly passionate about food."



Temperance residents CeCe Eloff, left, and Joyce Kubiak judge chef Musinski's lobster dish.



A Top Knife judge writes a note after sampling chef Gawura's seabass dish.



A meringue cake dessert by Palio's Taylor Hoener



Zia's Brittney Hagan, second from right, gets help with her kale and cream cheese stuffed pork chops from chef Adam Cane, right.