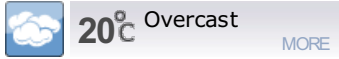




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Team Canada goes for culinary gold Olympian chefs rely on Canadian food prepared the Canadian way

BY RANDY SHORE SEPTEMBER 24, 2008

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VANCOUVER - Faster, higher, tastier. That's the credo of Canada's kitchen Olympians as they work out their chops and loosen their sauces in anticipation of the quadrennial IKA Culinary Olympic Games in Erfurt, Germany, in October.

Canadian food prepared the Canadian way is what judges will get from Team Canada.

Culinary Team Canada (from left): J.C. Felicella, Tobias MacDonald, Scott Jaeger, Harid Salimian, Mckey Zhao and Cameron Huley.

"We definitely have some science on our side and modern techniques, but most of it is fairly traditional," said Scott Jaeger, chef and owner of The Pear Tree in Burnaby. "You can tell when these science guys are trying too hard."

Hopefully, the hot-gel-and-liquid-centre ravioli on Team Canada's menu won't prove too bizarre for the judges' tastes.

"We want to put food in front of the judges that they can understand," he said. "Our food is real food, not a science project."

Team manager J.C. Felicella agreed. "It's pure Canadiana."

"Our triple-A beef is the best in the world and sable fish, you can't get anywhere else," he said.

Designing the menu is every bit as crucial as executing perfect food.

"You have to get the judge's attention with flavour and visual impact," said Jaeger.

"You want to do something that hasn't been done before and that hopefully no other team has thought of," he said. "The food and the

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preparation need to ring 'Canada.'"

Alder smoke and maple syrup will not figure in this year's entry. Been there. Done that.

Ditto for musk ox and venison.

Trout skin, sable fish, skirt steak, lobster, apples and beets will feature instead.

The tricky bit is reinventing the menu for each competition.

After several podium finishes in competitions leading up to the Culinary Olympics, Canada's offerings have been heavily scrutinized.

Led by Felicella, VCC culinary department head, and team captain Tobias MacDonald of La Belle Auberge, the team has spent hundreds of hours discussing which foods best represent Canadian cuisine and developing original recipes to showcase them.

The dessert - an orange cake with Yuzu sorbet - has been conceptualized, developed and rejected eight times over the past year and new tweaks were being discussed as recently as Sunday, said MacDonald.

Jaeger competed for Canada at the ultra-prestigious Bocuse D'Or in 2007, so he knows the culinary Olympics are just as unforgiving as the games that just wrapped up in Beijing.

"You're under the clock and you only get one shot to get it right," Jaeger said.

Like Canada's entry at the Beijing Games, you don't just throw a culinary team together at the last minute. Assembled under the auspices of the Canadian Culinary Federation, this team of six chefs, three coaches and 11 support staff has been working for more than a year to prepare for this competition.

Add to that a never-ending series of team cooking practices and fundraisers, not to mention running their own restaurants and perhaps even a personal life.

Last week several team chefs spent the day cooking in the blazing Aldergrove sun at a fundraiser organized by sponsor Hills Foods.

While trying to chat with guests, the ebullient Felicella laughs like a madman when he receives a list on his PDA of more than 100 details that must be tied up before the team leaves in about two weeks time.

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Every bit of food the team will serve will be transported in 21 coolers as the team's carry-on baggage on the plane trip over. Plus, 1,200 kilos of equipment in crates down below.

Felicella is running on pure adrenalin.

"There won't be much sleep between now and then," he said.

The games, which started in 1896, are officially called the Internationale Kochkunst Ausstellung, though few outside Germany would attempt to use that name. (Say it three times fast. I dare you.)

To win, the team must excel at hot and cold dishes as well as pastry and desserts. And they have to do it better than the other 2,000 chefs from 40 countries around the world.

Teams are asked to prepare food in four categories.

Two culinary art categories require a variety of show platters of finger food and hors d'oeuvres, hot and cold, a vegetarian platter, a cold-displayed three-course meal and four cold-displayed main courses.

The pastry category requires a set of banquet-style desserts and four exclusive desserts, plus a themed selection of biscuits and chocolates.

The final category is a hot lunch service serving two distinct menus, each of which must include an appetizer, main course and dessert.

The hot service replicates the operation of a busy restaurant lunch service. The five cooking members of the team serve 110 meals in two hours.

"You'll get a table for two and then an order for a table of six," Jaeger explained. "It's a lot like what chefs do every day, rather than a banquet service."

Therein lies the strength of Canada's team, Jaeger said.

"We all still cook in our restaurants," he said. No clip-board chefs aboard.

The fish dish is pan-roasted a la minute, rather than done ahead of time.

"No matter what we do making terrines or poaching it, you can't beat the flavour of a pan-roasted fish," he said. "And we are all guys who can do that. working three or four pans at a time."

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Team Canada could just as easily be called Team B.C., as all but one member hails from Lotusland. Cameron Huley of Winnipeg's St. Charles Golf and Country Club is the lone outsider.

Rounding out the roster are pastry chef Mickey Zhao of St. Germain Bakery, and Hamid Salimian of the Westin Bear Mountain Resort.

All the chefs are gathering in Vancouver for a final dress rehearsal Sept. 30 in which they will cook the entire menu as it is to be presented in Germany when competition gets underway Oct. 19.

They have done it only once before in its entirety.

"Doing the full cold and hot [menu] was pretty exhilarating," he said.

This time they will use only the pots and pans that they will take with them to Germany and only the number of burners available to them in Germany. Like a space mission, there's no sense practising with any tools that aren't going to be in the capsule.

It will be only the second time they have done the whole menu a la carte under those conditions, but that doesn't concern Jaeger.

"If you do it too many times it won't feel as fresh," he explained. "There's a lot to be said for that moment of inspiration."

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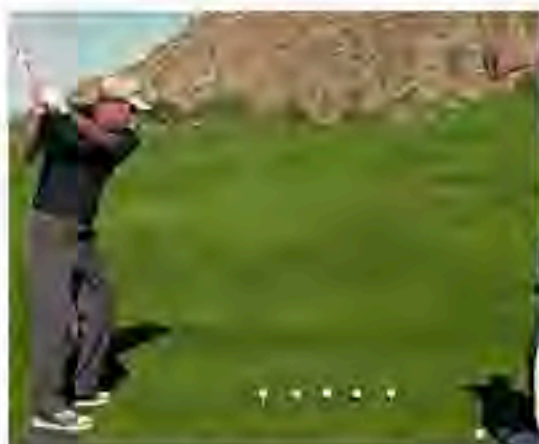
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