

## Marc Lepine takes home the Gold Medal Plate

### Judges praise chef's blend of traditional and 'molecular gastronomy' foods

BY RON EADE, OTTAWA CITIZEN NOVEMBER 16, 2011



Marc Lepine from Atelier restaurant, top of podium, took the gold while Caroline Ishii from Zen Kitchen, right, came second and the bronze was captured by Charles Part of Les Fougères, left, at Monday night's Gold Medal Plates event.

**Photograph by:** Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen, Ottawa Citizen

Atelier restaurant chef/ owner Marc Lepine took the top gold medal Monday at the annual Gold Medal Plates regional competition to raise money for Canada's elite athletes. His third year in competition, this is the first time Lepine has placed in the winner's circle.

Scoring silver for the second year running was Caroline Ishii, chef/co-owner of Zen Kitchen, while the third-place bronze was awarded to chef/ co-owner Charles Part of Les Fougères in Chelsea, Que. Part has participated in all seven regional gold medal competitions since they began in 2004; in 2008 he won gold, while in 2006 he took bronze.

The gold medal enables Lepine to move on to a grand finale competition Feb. 10 and 11 in Kelowna,

B.C., where top winners from nine regions across Canada will compete for the title of Canadian Culinary Champion.

"It was unexpected," Lepine said moments after raising the coveted gold plate above his head. "It would have been impossible without my team."

The competition, which pits chefs against each other, sees the lead chef and his or her team prepare a meal - or plate - matched with Canadian wine, beer or cocktails for judges to taste.

Lepine said his plate this year was improved by being a more coherent offering.

"The plate tonight was all together and not a tour of elements. Last year it was too disjointed," he said.

Judges credited Lepine's balance in tastes, textures, and a thoughtful blend of traditional and "molecular gastronomy" elements for his push to the top. His dish was called Qualicum Beach Scallop with Potato and Truffle, paired with Hidden Bench 2009 Chardonnay from Niagara. But the title betrays none of the hidden complexity of perfectly seared, plump scallop presented with aerated potato and truffle purée served with bacon, dehydrated fennel, lemon-thyme and shallot sauce, nested under a rigid sheet of dehydrated celery root dusted with bacon powder, pike caviar, lovage and lemon balm - in short, a perfect marriage of tradition and deconstructed elements.

"I thought Lepine's dish was interesting with molecular components," said James Chatto, national senior judge for the gold plates events, and a senior writer at Food & Drink magazine.

"His dish was also delicious, which is not always the case with molecular gastronomy. The whole plate made sense to me. There were all sorts of hidden treasures in the sauce, and the caviar boosted the fishy side of the dish. It was all very well-conceived."

Placing silver, Ishii's dish was simply called Gyoza with Japanese Curry, dedicated to the memory of her mother, Suyeko, who long shared her passion for cooking. Ishii paired it with Cave Spring 2009 Chenin Blanc from Ontario.

"It was a difficult challenge and we had a stellar cast of competing chefs this year," she said. "I'm honoured to be in second place again."

Of course, there were many more components to the dish than the name suggests. It included the Gyoza or Japanese dumpling stuffed with shiitake and oyster mushrooms and kimchee, Japanese curry sauce, an eggplant lollipop with a yuzu-Asian pear glaze, roasted squash with apple butter-aged brown rice and miso glaze, a grilled rice ball infused with sake lees and filled with an herb pesto, soyroni reduction paint on the plate, watermelon radish ginger pickle, persimmon hot sauce and lotus root dusted with matcha-wakame salt.

"I liked Caroline's dish very much," Chatto opined. "It's fascinating to see a vegetarian dish in this competition and it certainly held its own. Everything on her dish was involved in the conversation and nothing was irrelevant."

Part was the only contestant this year who has participated in all seven Ottawa regional challenges.

"I'm thrilled to be acknowledged and a part of this event. And I'm very glad for Marc Lepine tonight," Part said.

His dish was called Bellaar-Spruyt Farm Lamb with Home Preserved Lemon, Fennel and Folies Bergères Feta, referring to lamb raised near Wakefield and cheese from near Val des Monts, Quebec. It was paired with Norman Hardie 2009 County Chardonnay from Prince Edward County.

"I loved Charles' lamb with preserved lemon and fennel," Chatto said, "and it made sense to pair it with the white wine. He had a beautiful tenderloin sausage and bits of neck and shoulder wrapped in brilliant green spinach leaves.

"Overall the competition was definitely a step up from last year," Chatto said. "Most of the dishes were

complex, as if chefs were cooking special competition dishes rather than their own food. There was lots of imagination, and it's unusual to have seven white wines and three reds - it's as if all chefs were aiming to be lighter in textures than we were accustomed to.

"We've had years when there was lots of red meat, but this year we had lamb paired with white wine and beef with white wine, so that reflected a lightness of textures," Chatto said.

Monday's competition was held at the National Arts Centre, where a sold-out crowd of 450 people paid \$350 a ticket. Ottawa was the second-last regional competition before the finale early next year.

Founded in 2003, Gold Medal Plates has since become an annual cross-Canada culinary competition that has so far raised almost \$5 million for Canada's Olympic and Paralympic athletes.

Competitors in Ottawa are invited each year by a panel of judges headed by Citizen restaurant critic Anne DesBrisay, who is also chief judge for the event in Ottawa. Other chefs in competition this year were Matthew Brearley of Castlegarth Restaurant in White Lake, Matthew Carmichael of Restaurant E18hteen, Ross and Simon Fraser of Fraser Café, Michael Hay of Courtyard Restaurant, Patricia Larkin of Black Cat Bistro, Lili Sullivan of East & Main in Wellington, Ont., and Steve Wall of Luxe Bistro..

In addition to DesBrisay and Chatto, judges for the Ottawa event included cookbook authors and TV personalities Margaret Dickenson and Pam Collacott, chef Judson Simpson of the Parliamentary Dining Room, and chef Michael Moffatt of Beckta Dining & Wine and Play restaurants, who won the top gold prize in 2010.