



The Florida Restaurant and Lodging Show, at the Orange County Convention Center, featured vendors catering to restaurants, chefs, competitions and more. Maria Dodsworth, a culinary student at Keiser University in Melbourne, right, gets a cake critique from chef Stefan Reimer, left. (Chris Kridler, FLORIDA TODAY)



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*BY CHRIS KRIDLER
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The air smells like pizza. Booths sparkle with well-lit displays of meat, ice cream and chocolates. And piles of cheese draw toothpick-bearing visitors eager to taste the offerings at the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Show in Orlando.

Last weekend's event drew vendors hoping to equip restaurateurs with everything from new menus to comfortable footwear to gourmet ingredients.

It also drew people who remain passionate about food.

Taking the cake

Maria Dodsworth, a culinary student at Keiser University in Melbourne, leans in to hear what Chef Stefan Reimer has to say about her Chocolate Peanut Butter Mayan Goddess Cake. It's one confection in a long row of cakes and candy towers on the theme of "Jungle Safari."

The chef is full of constructive criticism, even though he didn't try the truffles on top.

"This was my very first pastry competition, and I'm also in my very first baking class," Dodsworth says. It's the first time the pastry competition opened a student category, so she entered her cake. It's a study in glossy chocolate, decorated with fondant vines and leaves.

"It's an old-fashioned chocolate buttermilk cake . . . with a peanut butter mousse filling," she says, "and then it's layered in between on both tiers. And then on the top, it's chocolate fondant, which actually tastes like a Tootsie Roll. And on the very top of it, I have a pyramid of peanut butter truffles that are dipped in chocolate."

She says the critique went well, as the chef suggested ways to add moisture and fine-tune the details. "Since this was my first competition, they took it a little easy on me," she says. The beautiful cake probably helped.

Pizza prodigy

You've seen him on "Today" and "Ellen," and soon he'll be on Jimmy Kimmel's late-night show. But most days, you'll catch him in the sixth grade at Indialantic Elementary.

Sam Niemeier, 12, again earned the title of Throw Dough Champion at the restaurant show on Sunday, tossing faux pizza dough in a routine choreographed to "Kung Fu Fighting."

"I thought it was cool," he says of dough-throwing, a passion he picked up when he acquired a Throw Dough about five years ago. "And I like pizza, too." He chats easily while spinning and tossing the floppy faux dough at the PMQ Pizza Magazine booth.

His mom, Dana, says they make pizza frequently at home, usually with a thin crust and good ingredients. "I'll make the dough, and then he will spin it out. I don't have the skill," she says with a laugh.

She's even traveled with Sam and the U.S. Pizza Team to Italy. She never dreamed this would be his avocation. Sam either wants to open a pizzeria with people spinning dough or be an engineer like his dad.

"We thought he would like baseball or soccer or something like that," Dana says, "but when he saw his brother yo-yoing and doing something a little alternative to that, he really liked that. So he decided he would do something a little different from his brother, and apparently he just took off. He really likes it."

Surrounded as he is by vendors hawking pizza ovens, displays, cheeses and slices, Sam admits that he occasionally wearies of pizza.

"During the conventions, we eat pizza like all the time," he says. "It's really fun. It's really good, too, but . . . sometimes I just want something really just a little different. But I do want pizza very much."

Class act

Deborah Buza, a chef and instructor at Keiser University in Melbourne, wanders the floor nibbling on food samples, flanked by culinary students in white.

"The show's great," she says. "I think we're really enjoying it. The girls just recently got their critiques for their pastries, and I think they did an absolutely fabulous job. We got a lot of positive critiques, and we're looking forward to the next competition for sure."

As the students pick up tips on how to make great food, vendors market their wares as ways to perfect the restaurant experience, whether it's how an eatery looks, what kind of doggie bags it has or, perhaps most important, what kinds of ingredients it uses.

Case in point is the Guittard booth, showing off gourmet chocolates made from cacao crops around the world, with subtle and velvety flavors.

"Especially when we're talking about pastries, OK, you always want to look for the best products available to utilize," Buza says. "Whatever you start with, you want to end with. So if you start with good product, you end with good product."

Later, the Keiser team learns the results of the competitions: Buza won a bronze medal in the Taste of Elegance Signature Recipe Pork Hot Food Competition, while fellow instructor Marge Erixson won bronze in Alligator Hot Food; student Andrew Addleman won silver in the Florida Beef Council cookoff, entering as a pro; and Allyson Ramirez won a bronze in the student cake division.