

Young Whistler chef named Canada's best

From Vancouver Sun

February 13, 2008

<http://www.canada.com/vancouversun/news/arts/story.html?id=3df953e2-15c1-4875-b15b-985e0cca019b>

Mia Stainsby, Vancouver Sun

Published: Wednesday, February 13, 2008

At an age where other chefs only dream of recognition, Melissa Craig has sauntered on to the national stage, a dark horse of a winner.

Over a three-day national competition last weekend, she took the title of Canada's Best Chef, beating out some of the best chefs in Canada at the Canadian Culinary Championship.

Craig, 28, is the exec chef at Whistler's Bearfoot Bistro. She apprenticed at Sooke Harbour House, then worked in Australia for a year and a half before taking the job at Bearfoot four years ago.

Leading up to the national competition, she won silver in the provincial regional competition last November. Pino Posteraro of Cioppino's Italian restaurant in Vancouver took gold but could not make it to the nationals. She learned two weeks before the competition that she would be taking his place. At the regionals, she beat out Vancouver's other top chefs, Rob Feenie and David Hawksworth.

At the national competition in Toronto, chefs duke it out in three competitions over three days. The first is a black-box competition containing mystery ingredients. Chefs have 50 minutes to come up with a starter and a main dish. The ingredients were Ontario white fish, flank steak, peanuts, honeycomb, plantain and celery root. She made seared flank steak with peanut honeycomb glaze topped with cilantro and mint leaves and a pan-seared white fish with celery root and spinach purée and tomato basil vinaigrette.

On the second day, the chefs were given a mystery wine and \$400 to shop for ingredients to create appetizers for 150 people. She made a lobster club sandwich and lobster bisque. On the third day, they had to create a dish to go with the wine they had chosen for their provincial win. She made a trilogy of Alaskan king crab -- a coconut crab chili soup; crab croquette encrusted in coconut and served with mango basil sauce; and a crab cucumber salad in a bamboo leaf cone with soya pop rocks.

Upon announcing her win, the judges remarked on the originality in her cooking as well as the excellent pairing of the crab soup with the Tantalus riesling.

Bearfoot Bistro owner Andre St. Jacques said he was bouncing off the table with joy upon her win. "She was the underdog. She won against the heavy hitters," he says.

Craig, on the other hand, he says, went to have a good time. "Not like me. I'm hoping we're going to win. I've always played to win. I told her she's gotta have more drive. But she's just a foodie. She loves cooking."

St. Jacques, for his part, treats her to some of the world's finest cooking, at restaurants like the impossible-to-get-into El Bulli in Spain. Craig has also dined in fine restaurants

in Japan and France on his coin.

"I was just going for the experience," Craig says of the competition. "Even on stage, when it was announced, I had no idea."

Craig says the crab trilogy will go on the Bearfoot menu soon. Cooking in a Whistler restaurant, she admits, has its challenges. "In winter, for sure because the road closes so often. Sometimes I don't get my orders until late in the day or sometimes, not at all. I have to be prepared for that."

mstainsby@png.canwest.com