



FEATURES

Conference Center Cuisine

How top chefs from IACC venues compete for the coveted Copper Skillet

Food lovers will forever argue about which of the world's cuisines is best: French, Italian, conference center, Chinese -- wait, what was that?

The grand finale Over at the National Conference Center, executive chef Craig Mason is preparing for the big day. "We've been button-holed with IACC officials to go over all of the details of the ultimate cook-off," he says. "And this is in addition to working the annual meeting wrapped around this event. Throughout, we use the menus and recipes originally submitted by the finalists when they first entered the competition, so the IACC membership can appreciate the skills of these talented chefs."

All of the eight finalists (one from each competing country plus one "chef at large," still to be determined at press time) will compete on a level playing field, says Mason. "Each will have identically equipped work stations, and they all get the same mystery basket."

Indeed, Mason is charged with preparing the baskets, and he is appropriately tight-lipped about their contents. "Let's just say that along with the required proteins and starches, I'm planning to throw in a couple of curve balls just to keep things exciting."

Mason, who prepares some 40,000 meals per month at the National Conference Center, competed earlier this year for the U.S. slot and knows well what the finalists will face. "Sure, it's a bit nerve-wracking," he notes. "You have certain concepts racing through your head, then you find out the ingredients and have to quickly make adjustments on the fly. It all comes down to two pans, one burner and 30 minutes."

All of the finalists begin their trial at the same time; the judges (the same group that worked the U.S. final) walk from station to station, observing and taking notes on things like quality of sanitation skills and prowess with a knife, until the bell rings marking an end to preparation and the beginning of the tasting.

"It's always a great moment when the winner is announced," says Mason. "You end up with one really happy chef."

When all is said and swallowed, it's clear that IACC conference center chefs deserve their day in the sun -- and a respectful tip of the toque from their peers in the other realms of the gustatory galaxy.

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