Chefs battle it out in the kitchen

The kitchen at Okanagan College was a hub of activity during the Black Box competition for the Canadian Culinary Championships held in Kelowna last weekend. See story on A3.
Food culture highlight of chef competition

Kathy Michaels
kmichaels@kelownacapnews.com

In a competition that set 11 of the country's best chefs against one another, Edmontonian Ryan O'Flynn came out the official champ. 

The chef, who in the past has cooked for Queen Elizabeth and the members of U2, took the gold medal after the final dish was served at the Canadian Culinary Championship last Saturday night in front of a crowd of 600 people, strong, adding another feather to his already well-decorated chef's cap. 

But the Gold Medal Plates event had a few more winners worth mentioning.

Surgering chefs from Okanagan College's culinary program, Canadian food culture and, perhaps most of all, the city itself were big winners.

Touring through any of the challenges that took place over the weekend and speaking with attendees quickly clarified any questions about the benefit of this competition to Kelowna.

Foodies hailing from one side of Canada to the other, made the journey to the Okanagan to get a chance to hobnob with the nation's best chefs.

Giselle, Nanette, Suki and Nicole Haché were among those on the foodie pilgrimage. The sisters—the first two from St. John's Newfoundland, then from Vancouver and Montreal respectively—make it a priority to meet once a year for some bonding.

This year Nanette suggested coming to the Gold Medal Plates, and they all jumped at the chance. And, as meals were dished out and wine was poured, all said they'd do it again.

"I think it's amazing," said Nicole. "I'm blown away by how well-organized it is. I had no idea what we'd be getting...I really enjoy going to great restaurants and now I'm getting to meet the best chefs in Canada. It's exciting!"

Giselle chimed in that her sister "was almost giddy" about the opportunity.

"It's true," Nicole admitted, pointing out that her hometown representative cooks for stars like Kity Perry when they go to Montreal, and now she was getting a chance to speak with him.

All four of the sisters said they would be making return trips to the valley to further soak in its food and wine culture. "It's beautiful here...with the mountains and the lakes. I'll definitely be coming back," said Nanette.

As an aside, all the sisters had Edmonton in their list of top two best chefs for that night's dish. At a table across the room during the Saturday finale, Regina residents Sarah Fedorchuk and Hanna Uy—along with their husbands—were also reveling in all there was on offer. "It's fantastic...so much fun," said Fedorchuk, noting they'd likely return to the Okanagan at a later date.

While the tourism draw of Gold Plates could have multiplying effects, the appeal of the competition also reflects the rise of food culture in this country.

Chef Luc Jean, of Jane's Restaurant in Winnipeg, pointed out that can be checked up to TV. "Ever since the food Network came out, people have become way more knowledgeable about and more interested in food than ever before," he said, after his turn in the kitchen for the Black Box competition.

"Fifteen to 20 years ago, you had a hard time finding olive oil on cooking shelves. Now people know about different foods, they know about different styles."

"It's meant that chefs have had to tap into a deeper knowledge base as well," said Nanette. "It's still, however, a tough industry to make a career in."

"I worked in the undoselly of the industry, I worked in London and got treated like garbage by some primadona chefs, but that's life," he said.

"If you really want to do this for a living, follow your heart. There's nothing wrong with different types of food."

"You don't have to do extreme fine dining. Do fish and chips. Do a food truck. Do high and comfort food. Do something you like and enjoy...if you want to do it, work for people you look up to, people who will treat you right."

Dozens of Okanagan College students got a tour of duty with the chefs. They were used as assistants.

Chef Bernard Crevon said it would be a learning experience and