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Virginia Chef Wins Chaîne des Rôtisseurs National 2013 Best Young Chef Competition

By Marilyn LaRocque

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Daniel Scott Gorman, 26, “Tournant” chef at the Inn at Little Washington, Washington, VA, took top honors in the national “2013 Best Young Chef” competition sponsored by the Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs. He was the Mid-Atlantic regional winner and vied against nine other regional winners from throughout the U.S. and Hawaii/Pacific Islands and the Caribbean Islands on Saturday, June 8, at the culinary school of Kendall College in Chicago.

At an awards gala held that evening at the Trump Hotel, Chicago, Gorman received a crystal trophy, red-ribboned gold medal, and three years’ membership in the Chaîne. He will represent the U.S. at the international finals in Istanbul, Turkey, on September 6th at the Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs’ International Jeunes Chefs Rôtisseurs Competition, which typically brings together about 24 of the world’s top young chefs from among the 80 member nations. The United States has won the international contest only once in its 36-year history—in 2011.

Two other 26-year-old chefs placed second and third nationally. Representing the Midwest, Brandon Zarb, Sous Chef at Henri, Chicago, took second place; third went to Hawaii/Pacific Islands regional winner Gary Marcos, line cook at Halekulani Hotel & Resort, Honolulu, HI. Chefs had to be under 27 years of age as of September 1, 2013, to compete.

Chefs are judged on their culinary skills by a panel of distinguished chefs divided between food tasting and kitchen observation. Tasting judges in Chicago included: Gaetano Ascione, VC Culinaire Honoraire, Executive Chef, Gioco, Chicago; Michael Garbin, Executive Chef, Union League Club, Chicago; Kevin Hickey, Executive Chef, Four Seasons Hotel, Chicago; Art Inzinga, Regional Culinaire, Professor, Pennsylvania Culinary Institute; Chris Koetke, VC Culinaire, Vice President, School of Culinary Arts, Kendall College; Simeon Roldan, Bailli de Chicago Chapitre, Chaîne des Rôtisseurs. Kitchen judges, all Chef Instructors from Kendall College, included Michael Artlip and Michel Coatrieux. Kitchen Manager was Chef Instructor Pierre Checchi.

Heinz Hofmann, Conseiller Culinaire et des Professionnels, Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, who served as general chairman for the Young Chef competition, provided insights into the judging process. “The judges are looking for a clean presentation of a dish,” he remarked, “not overly ‘dressed up’ but still appealing to the eye, and savory or well seasoned. Being prepared properly to the right temperature is paramount. Other elements are innovativeness in the composition of the menu and the dish as well as the look of the plate.”

The national and international contests require competitors to plan, prepare and plate three courses in four hours using a mystery basket of ingredients as well as a typically stocked “pantry” of items provided during the contest. Ingredients in the mystery basket included ramps, beets, rhubarb, duck lake trout, and Vermont maple syrup, all of which were required ingredients in the contestant’s menu. For his menu, Gorman prepared an appetizer of crispy skin lake trout with trout and mushroom agnolotti, tomato butter, and pickled ramp. His main course featured pan-roasted duck breast with potato duck hash, onion soubise, glazed beets, and maple duck jus. For dessert he paired flourless chocolate cake with rhubarb compote, rhubarb and strawberry granite, and drunken strawberries.

Gorman got off to a good start. “When I first received the mystery basket,” he said, “I was excited! I knew every ingredient in it, plus some were my favorites. I absolutely love ramps and trout. So right away I knew I was on the right path; however, I also knew I wanted more vegetables, which was the tricky part for me. In fact, the lack of vegetables from the par stock was probably my hardest challenge.”

Gorman approached his task systematically. “While going through my basket and the par stock list (basic vegetables, wines, dairy, berries, flours, etc), I quickly decided to cook the proteins simply and in a way that would highlight what they were. Then I determined which secondary ingredients would go best together. Trout and ramps are a perfect pair that I have been eating since I was 12. Duck, maple, and beets are foods screaming to form a team. And for me, rhubarb is always best a little bit sweet. From that point on, I matched techniques that worked the best with each ingredient and that I was comfortable with...and a menu was born.

“For the appetizer,” Gorman explained, “I decided to do a crispy skin fish. For me it is the best way to enjoy the subtle yet great flavor of a fresh water fish while also achieving great texture. I knew I had to do something with the trim of the fish, and I love making and eating pasta; so I went with the agnolotti.

“Ramps are great many ways,” he observed, “but, to accompany the trout, I thought a pickle would cut through the rich sauce and a grilled leaf would bring an earthy tone to the dish. For me, duck, the entrée, has to be pan roasted to get the true flavor. As for the hash, which is something I love to make for myself, it was a side component that I knew I had to do! Hash is a great way to achieve multiple textures, colors, and taste in just a few bites. The flourless cake was a go-to, something that was great; and I could easily remember the exact recipe—plus, it’s yummy! And the rhubarb is a natural fit for me with strawberry.”

Gorman drew on not only his restaurant experience but also his home cooking to develop his dishes.

“The dishes I made were a mélange of ideas and techniques of what I have made many places,” he commented. “I have been cooking the crispy skin trout since I was young at home. Glazed beets were one of the first competition veggies I mastered. The pasta recipe I honed when I won the ACF (American Culinary Federation) National Young Chef of the Year. However, there is a lot of influence from the Inn (The Inn at Little Washington). The soubise, tomato butter, and the flourless chocolate cake are all things I do there...not to mention the plating style.”

Organization was an essential component of Gorman's win. "When I'm preparing for a high-level national competition such as the Chaîne's of course I practice, practice, practice," he said. "However, organization, time management, and menu writing skills are just as important in competition as the food...without them, it's hard to deliver," he admitted.

"During the 30 minutes we were given to develop our menus, I also wrote a prep sheet and a time line and drew plate sketches. Most of the preparation sequences I do are simple. I have to determine what takes the longest, what is essential to production, and, if the inevitable happens and something goes wrong, what I can do without."

"In my opinion," stated Heinz Hofmann, "what set Daniel apart from the rest of the field were his organizational skills surrounding his workplace and the supreme cleanliness of his work. His food was by far the most savory and balanced of all presented. His plates were clean and not overloaded, and his portioning was just right.

"Besides Daniel's culinary talents," Hofmann added, "he is an outstanding credit to our profession, and I am sure he is most valued by his well-known Chef/Owner Patrick O'Connell of the Inn at Little Washington in Virginia. Naturally, since he is their Sous Chef and second in command at this very famous restaurant and hotel, he is exposed to great training. He has an inner drive to excel and is already planning his training program with a variety of chefs he and his boss know to prepare for Istanbul."

The International finals in Istanbul are just three months away. So Gorman is into his action plan. "I will be cooking as much as I can and working with as many chefs as possible to get many points of view, ideas, tricks, and inspiration," he remarked. "I would anticipate local ingredients, and possibly something unusual; but, at the same time, I would think that the organization would try to make the basket worldier to keep the playing field more even."

No stranger to high-level competitions, Gorman has been competing for over seven years. "It is always fun and a great learning opportunity," he said. "Chicago was an incredible experience! The food, the people, the competition were all amazing; and the competition itself was very well organized. I was highly impressed. I'm very grateful to the Chaîne for providing me with these opportunities not only to show what I can do but also to expand my culinary knowledge and skills and interact with other talented chefs.

"Through competitions I've met a lot of great cooks and chefs. I have been very lucky, yet it takes a lot of time and dedication to be successful. It can also be a great way to see the world. I have been to Brazil, Canada, and Korea. Hopefully I can do well in Turkey!"

Gorman has never visited Istanbul before. "I can't wait to see the city!" he enthused. "I hope to see as much as I can."

"As an organization, the Chaîne, and in particular the Chaîne Foundation, is proud to continue its tradition of supporting the culinary arts with its ten regional competitions, as well as the national and international competitions," Hofmann said. "In addition to the Young Chef program, we also conduct Young Sommelier competitions at the local, regional, national, and international levels and support the art of wine making and wine knowledge with scholarships.

“We fund scholarship foundations in a variety of hospitality and culinary schools. Our goal is to help young and upcoming students to propel themselves into their profession through our contributions to their school’s scholarship funds. We also support students individually through our Brillat–Savarin Society, a subgroup of charitable giving of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs.

“These competitions are equally important to the Chaîne as an organization as they are to the participants because they give exposure not just to them but to our society as well. We’re always looking to find new members, whether they have a professional or non-professional background,” Hofmann concluded.

The Chaîne des Rôtisseurs has 22,000 members worldwide, 6,000 in the United States, with chapters throughout the U.S. and around the globe. Additional information about the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs is available at its U.S. website, www.chaineus.org, and international website, www.chainedesrotisseurs.com.