



Chef of the Fest

by Makayla Hoppe



The San Diego Bay Wine & Food Festival brings more to the table than just wine and food; it is a celebration of the city's culture, neighborhoods and history. However, last year's Grand Tasting competition winner, Sam Zien (a.k.a. Sam the Cooking Guy), will tell you that the food is the only thing that matters. His winning dish was a braised oxtail Italian dipped sandwich and he and his restaurant Graze took the grand prize in 2022, their first year participating.

"I want to make something that somebody is going to fall in love with on the first bite. I don't want somebody taking a bite and going, 'Oh, it's interesting!' And then, you know, you just keep having a few bites and it gets better... I want it to be great. I want you to either love it or hate it right away: no middle ground," Sam said.

The braised oxtail sandwich was not a menu item at Graze when selected for the Grand Tasting. Sam and Gavin Mills, director of culinary, worked together to develop the item specifically for the festival.

"We had a great loaf of ciabatta that we split, put our house garlic aioli on it, then our house giardiniera — mixed Italian chopped vegetables, a little spicy — and then the slow, braised oxtail, it was really delicious," Sam said. "[We had] cheese in it...and then I would take the slices of it and dunk them in this delicious au jus that we'd made — it was

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to be when I’m cooking.”**

messy. We had a ridiculously long line. I could be boastful and say that I think we had the longest consistent line of the day, but I can’t make that claim because I only saw my own little world.”

Sam and the team from Graze served over 1,500 people that day, and they worked so hard to keep up with the demand that they never left their booth, even to see who had won the competition.

“So they made the announcement, [we had] no clue until somebody from the Wine and Food Festival came back and they went, ‘I don’t know if you just heard, you guys just won Chef [of the Fest].’ Oh, s--t! It was great,” Sam said.

The oxtail sandwich did not include any presentation, at least according to Sam.

“There was little performance or art to it. Some tables you would walk up to, and they had a beautiful little palm leaf bowl, delicate little thing! And there were 50 of them on the table and you just take one. Well, we were never that far ahead and it wouldn’t have been our style to have done anything like that or been

that organized. We were building [the sandwiches] as we went,” said Sam.

Sam the Cooking Guy has become well-known and beloved for his everyman style in the kitchen.

“I’ve used this line forever: big in taste and small in effort. That’s the way I like my food to be when I’m cooking, if possible. That’s the way I like the food to be on YouTube or in my books, so it’s duplicatable. The idea was that people would look, watch and go, ‘S--t, that looks great, I think I can make that,’ he said.

Sam and his team will be participating in the festival again in 2023 and he looks forward to another year of straightforward, honest and delicious food.

“If you’re going to go to a competition where you want to compete, you want as many people to like your stuff as possible,” he said. “I know if I went in with a super high-end French thing, a little wafer cracker, a little bit of Parmesan cheese made into a fancy little crisp and a dollop of caviar, sprinkle

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of truffle — that kind of thing — people might really like it. But will the majority of people be able to like it? I don't think so."

Why G-d Wants Me To Eat Bacon

Sam has often described himself as a Jewish kid from Canada. He came from a conservative Orthodox family, went to synagogue and celebrated the High Holidays. However, Sam and his family did not keep a kosher home.

"I like to think that there were kids watching me cook on TV and they would go, 'Okay, so he's Jewish, but he's eating bacon, he's eating shrimp, he's having a chicken sandwich with mayo on it, but he's still proud to be Jewish.'"

Years ago, Sam gave a talk at the JCC where he discussed what faith meant to him:

"Bernie Madoff: an Orthodox Jew. He gave to a synagogue, he probably kept kosher, whatever."

"Let's say the day comes; Bernie Madoff and I both end up in heaven in front of G-d at the same time. G-d has a clipboard, turns to me and says, 'Mr. Zien,' — 'Call me Sam.' — 'You're a good guy: you treat people well, are great toward older people, give to charity, etc. On the other side: shrimp, bacon, lobster, meat with milk. Well, okay, sorry about that. Mr. Madoff: synagogue, Orthodox, kosher, charity. On the other side: you stole from pretty much everybody you know and didn't care about it until you got caught.'"

"Do we both get into heaven? I want to believe that my G-d values that part of my heart more than what's rolling around in my stomach."

After his talk, Sam asked the audience to vote on what they felt mattered more: what was in their heart or what was in their stomach. To 72% of the audience, what they felt in their heart defined their faith. Sam informally titled his talk "Why G-d Wants Me To Eat Bacon."

Although he has opened discussions about not keeping kosher, Sam still respects Jewish cuisine, albeit with a twist. He will participate in a benefit dinner at Gold Finch Deli for (a belated) Jewish Heritage Month. His dish is a unique matzo ball soup that he described as "a Jewish grandmother and a Chinese grandmother run into each other." The matzo balls will be inside wonton wrappers and served alongside chopped liver egg rolls. All money from the dinner goes toward the Anti-Defamation League. 

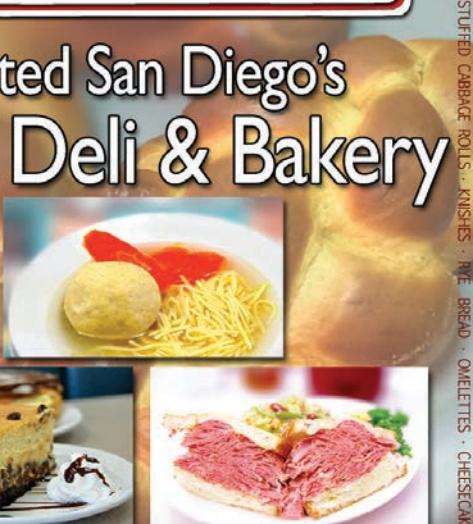
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