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Topnotch chef features Vermont fare at N.Y. gala

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By Rochelle Lash | 0 comments

It was definitely New York, N.Y., but for a moment I thought I glimpsed the Green Mountains. And Holsteins grazing in a meadow along Mountain Road. Then there was a whiff of bracing country air.

All illusion, it turned out.

I had visions of Vermont, but I was in Manhattan, rendered light-headed by the flavors and aromas of the Stowe countryside.

The occasion was the cuisine event of the year for Mark Timms, executive chef of Topnotch at Stowe Resort & Spa. One of television's Iron Chefs, he had been invited to be guest chef at the prestigious James Beard Foundation, an international epicurean society with 400,000 members.

Timms' localvore theme was From Farm to Table, and he had rehearsed his menu for patrons at Topnotch. Adjustments ensued. More rosemary, less sage. Savory, yes. Salty, no.

Finally, a brigade of seven Topnotch chefs — including chef de cuisine Cortney Quinn, sous chef Michael Coscia and pastry chef Veronica Wirth — chauffeured two vans of Vermont delicacies to New York.

"I was awake every hour on the hour, wondering if the lamb would arrive on time," Timms said. It did.

About 60 guests arrived at a stately brownstone in Greenwich Village that had been the home of James Beard, the renowned guru of gastronomy. This is the Carnegie Hall of cuisine, and Timms debut performance turned out to be a sensation.

Everyone at the party filed through the hallowed kitchen where the Topnotch team was fine-tuning elaborate hors d'oeuvres. Timms' opening act was a series of artfully presented delicacies, including crispy cones topped with savory rabbit terrine and caper ice cream. When waiters passed porcelain spoons with English peas and mint crème fraîche, James Beard's habitués swooned.

Then it was on to the aristocratic, wood-paneled dining room, where tables were set with white Rosenthal china and shimmering crystal glasses, awaiting the wines supplied by Castello Banti of Italy.

Timms opened with a creamy mushroom-fennel soup en croûte followed by an inventive salad of tomatoes, tomato sorbet and organic mache from Pete's Greens in Craftsbury.

The main act started with potato-wrapped Canadian salmon — a nod to Topnotch's owners, the Cummings family of Montreal. Timms reached his crescendo with garlic and herb-rubbed lamb served with braised oxtail and hen-of-the-woods mushrooms, foraged around Stowe.

The cheese course showcased award-winning Vermont products: Lake's Edge goat cheese from Blue Ledge Farm in Salisbury; Bourrée, a raw-milk cheese from Dancing Cow Farmstead in Bridport; tangy Gore-Dawn-Zola from Green Mountain Blue Cheese in Highgate Springs; and the last of the sharp cheddar by Crowley in Healdville, which is closing its barn doors.

The finale, orchestrated by pastry chef Wirth, was a fusion of Green Mountain State classics — a baked apple brimming with rich maple brioche pudding and homemade ginger-caramel sauce cascading over ice cream churned from Mansfield Dairy ingredients.

There were calls for an encore, so Timms is considering adding some of these dishes to Norma's menu at Topnotch.

Rochelle Lash is a writer from Montreal.

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