



KATHLEEN O'ROURKE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dakota the Clydesdale tries to steal a bite of a doughnut from Jackson Ruscitti, 2 of Ridgefield, as visitors enjoy the 10th annual Maple Sugar Sunday sponsored by First County Bank at the Stamford Museum and Nature Center in Stamford.

Festival showcases maple sugar concoctions

By Devon Lash
STAFF WRITER

STAMFORD — It may have been a war between meatballs and cream puffs, but maple sugar wore the crown at Stamford Museum & Nature Center's annual Maple Sugar Sunday.

Two local chefs competed to win over voters' taste buds in the center's first Chef's

Challenge, sponsored by First County Bank, which paired samplers with maple sugar in a nontraditional way.

"We wanted to open everyone's mind when it comes to maple sugar," said Frank Daniele, executive chef for Frank & Julio's Complete Event Planning.

Daniele eschewed traditional breakfast staples and

prepared 1,600 Asian-inspired sesame-maple glazed meatballs atop a scallion pancake.

His competitor, Eddie Vazquez of Marcia Seldon Catering and Event Planning, chose to counter his savory sample with something sweet: a maple cream-stuffed cream puff in a maple glaze.

"The meatballs were going splendidly, then it seemed

the cream puffs had overtaken them," said Joan Buzzalino, a member of the Museum & Nature Center's board of trustees. "The sweet tooth always triumphs."

In the end, the voters, who professed they were thrilled to test their culinary prowess, chose Marcia Seldon's cream-puff creations,

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awarding second place to Daniele's meatballs.

"This is better than Top Chef Masters," Vazquez said, grinning above a table void of even cream puffs crumbles.

Both chefs said the dishes' popularity would probably land them a spot on their catering menus.

"I'm almost embarrassed I haven't done more with maple sugar," Daniele said.

Stamford Museum & Nature Center volunteers estimated more than 3,000 people visited the 10th annual festival, perhaps drawn by the unusually warm March weather.

The festival's emblematic Sugar Shack was a crowd favorite, drawing syrup connoisseurs and first-timers.

David Kelly, 9, of New Canaan, listened intently to the presentation, asking about the center's daily maple syrup output.

When the weather is warm during the day and freezing at night, volunteer Allan Klumac explained, gallons of sap from maple trees across the center are ready for collection.

Heated to high temperatures so water evaporates, the sticky syrup that pancake fans adore emerges, Klumac said.

Kelly, who weighed thicker store-bought syrup to the thinner, sweeter homemade stuff, eventually came down on the side of the thicker fare, though he mused about what he would need to concoct his own batch.

"You just need a lot of equipment," he said.

After a prompting from his dad, he added: "Oh yeah, and maple trees."

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