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Culinary Moxie

Two chefs from Maine return to fire up Harvest on the Harbor

BY MINDY WOERTER

Mainebiz E-news editor

Today

This October's Harvest on the Harbor food festival on the Portland waterfront brought two Maine-born chefs back to the Pine Tree State.

Falmouth native Zac Young, now a pastry chef at Flex Mussels in New York City and a contestant on Bravo's Top Chef Just Desserts, played host at the event's Sweet Stage, where he gave a demonstration on making a chocolate cream pie. At the same time, Michael Ruoss, originally from Old Orchard Beach and a longtime chef at Emeril's restaurant in New Orleans, hosted a grilling demonstration — where he dared to don a Saints football jersey. Ruoss also returned to alma mater Southern Maine



Chefs Zac Young, left, and Michael Ruoss brought their culinary panache to this year's

Photo/Tim Greenway

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Community College, where he taught Harvest on the Harbor students how to make a seafood gumbo that was later served to Harvest on the Harbor attendees.

Neither celebrity chef had heard of Harvest on the Harbor, which just completed its third annual event, before being asked to participate, but both touted the Portland region's foodie reputation. "In the last 10 years, the dining scene here has blown up," Ruoss says.

Young attributed Portland's burgeoning food scene to its rise in younger residents, "a new wave of customers here who want excitement with their food ... driving chefs to create something that's not shrimp bisque."

The Harvest on the Harbor event, held Oct. 21-23, attracted more than 5,000 people from 34 states and generated an estimated \$2 million for the local economy, according to a press release from its organizers. The presence of Young and Ruoss "added some buzz around the event, and attendees were excited to meet them," says Courtney McMennamin, the organization's executive director.

Young's pastry chef career began in college, where he taught himself how to make cookies before attending the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City and training in France. He worked as a pastry chef at Butter Restaurant in the city before becoming executive pastry chef at Flex Mussels last year. His dessert menu for its three seafood restaurants includes Maine-inspired deep fried whoopee pies and other twists on local sweets.

His talents earned him a spot on Top Chef Just Desserts, filmed over six weeks this past February and March and currently airing. On the show, Young goes head-to-head with 11 other dessert chefs. Watching himself every week on TV has been "weird," says Young, known on the show for his witty one-liners. He wouldn't reveal how the show ends, but at the time this issue of MaineBiz went to press he had made it into the top four.

Ruoss worked at the now-closed The Seaman's Club in Portland and the Snow Squall in South Portland before relocating to New Orleans and becoming a line chef at Emeril's flagship restaurant, NOLA, eventually working up to chef-de-cuisine. He opened his own restaurant, Salu, in New Orleans in 2000. Now, he works as a corporate chef with a restaurant group called Three of a Kind, which owns 12 restaurants in Louisiana and three out of state, where he's charged with developing menus and hiring new chefs. "My kids were getting older, I didn't see them enough," he says about stepping out of the kitchen.

Ruoss feels a strong connection to New Orleans, especially since Hurricane Katrina, which he says "bonded" people. But the immediate aftermath was tough for his restaurant, with staff departing and vendors struggling. "It really changed the way we did business," he says. "But we got a good head start on the recession: we had already changed to stay profitable."


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get a good head start on the recession, we had already changed to stay profitable.

Ruoss sees similarities between Maine food and the Cajun cuisine he's come to specialize in, especially the use of fresh seafood. "A haddock dish with Ritz ... I'll do it with red fish, and no one has ever seen it," he says. But a distinctly Maine dessert he made, Moxie sorbet, didn't go over quite as well. "I'm proud of that. It doesn't sell, people don't like it, and I like that they don't get it."

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