

And the Winner Is...

Chef Nunzio Patrino of Nunzio Ristorante Rustico in Collingswood...

Photography by Stuart Goldenberg

...whose stuffed Colorado lamb-anchored holiday meal resonated most with our readers, nearly 8,000 of whom weighed in. With 58 percent of votes for the last of seven rounds in seven months, Patrino can officially lay claim to the title of *South Jersey Magazine's* Top Chef 2009.

"I'm very happy to have won," Patrino told *SJM* when we gave him the good news. "I give my biggest thanks to my customers who voted for me, even though Chef Beverly did a very good job. It is very satisfying for me to have reached the finals and win, but it is even more satisfying for my staff—from the kitchen to the dining room—who worked very hard. We've all won. I owe this to my customers' support. My passion is cooking great-tasting food for my customers—and it shows."

Hearty kudos also go to Chef Markese Beverly of the ChopHouse in Gibbsboro, our worthy runner-up, who outlasted 14 other cul-

nary contenders to make it to the final bout, winning three rounds himself (the blueberry, corn and apple challenges) along the way. "This was definitely a great challenge to be part of," Beverly says. "I really enjoyed meeting some of the other chefs in the competition. It was a lot of fun." Fun and then some. This year's competition was such a success, we're already in the planning stages for the 2010 showdown.

Before we turn the page on this year's journey, however, there's one last order of business to attend to. Both Patruo and Beverly threw a festive tasting at their respective restaurants, featuring their submitted holiday meal appetizer, main course and dessert (full menu recipes are available in our November issue and on SouthJersey.com) and attended by winners of our online reader's recipe challenge and several fellow Top Chef competitors. We surveyed our diners afterward for a firsthand account. A sampling of their impressions can be found on the following pages.

The Road to the Title

"Doing the monthly Top Chef challenges took a little work in coming up with the dishes and recipes, and especially in incorporating them into all of our other daily specials," says Patruo of the individual rounds leading up to the finals, in which the participating chefs were asked to riff off of fresh Jersey produce. "Our customers liked being surprised with the next dish, trying it and then voting for it online. It became sort of a game, which they obviously enjoyed participating in." Here's a list of Patruo's Top Chef entries for the first six rounds. Not only did he take the overall title; he also won the individual pumpkin and tomato challenges.

Round 1: Asparagus Agro Dolce with Shrimp and Angel Hair Pasta

Round 2: Blueberry Walnut Turnover Dessert

Round 3: Jersey Corn Risotto with Saffron, Crab Meat, Scallops and Arugula Salad

Round 4: Jersey Tomato Caprese Style Mozzarella Appetizer (challenge winner)

Round 5: Apple-Almond Tatin Dessert

Round 6: Pumpkin Gnocchi in a Gorgonzola Cream Sauce served with Braised Short Ribs (challenge winner)

Go to SouthJersey.com to access all of Patruo's recipes.

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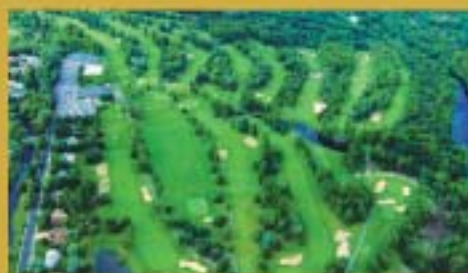
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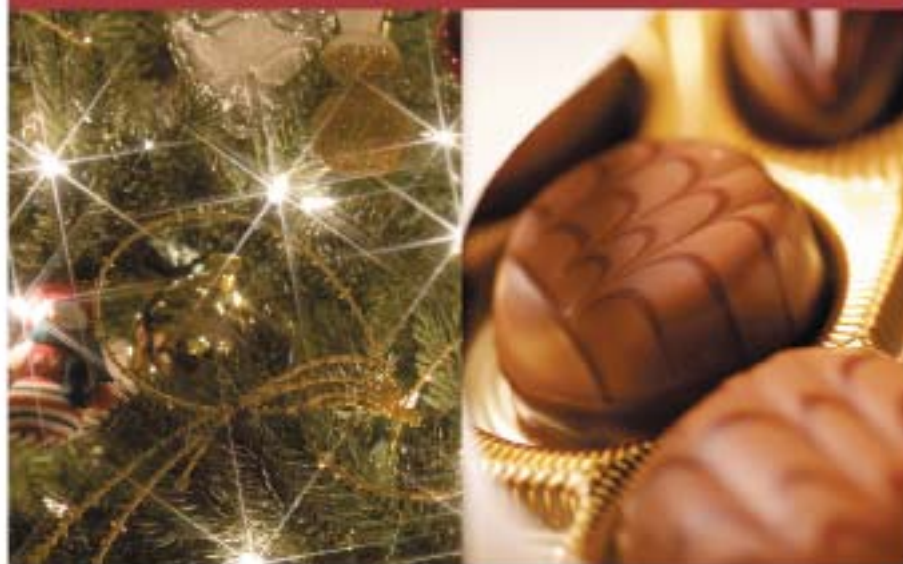
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The Nunzio Ristorante Rustico Tasting

Appetizer: Fresh Maine Lobster in a Tarragon-Brandy Sauce over Crispy Parsnips and Baby Greens

Main Course: Colorado Lamb Stuffed with Figs, Prosciutto and Asiago Cheese served with Yukon Truffle Mashed Potatoes

Dessert: Poached Pear in Vanilla Syrup with Zabaglione Sauce and Bitter Chocolate Shavings

• "The minute I stepped into Nunzio's, I was immediately transported to a quaint Italian village. The food and atmosphere was done with exquisite taste. The appetizer's salad was refreshing and the lobster cooked to perfection. I also enjoyed the rack of lamb, which was tender and juicy with every bite. The poached pear in vanilla



syrup for dessert was so light it melted in my mouth. The staff was very attentive and friendly, and I look forward to eating there again."

—Caron Jackson, MB & Associates PR, Haddonfield

• "The lamb arrived looking just as I expected it would—resting on a bed of silky smooth white-truffle mashed potatoes with fresh cracked black pepper, the meat a beautiful medium rare and seasoned perfectly, with the figs, prosciutto and cheese tucked carefully inside and the glacé drizzled around the plate. The poached pear looked like a masterpiece, the sauce in a perfect pool around the plate and the pear nestled in a pizzelle dough with a chocolate ganache square on top. The pear was poached wonderfully with a hint of sweetness."

—Randy Wagner, chef, Carolina Blue Smokehouse and Taproom, Pitman

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