



State's top chef works in Trumbull

Written by Donald Eng
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Michael Dunton, senior sous chef at J. Porter's Restaurant in the Trumbull Marriott, begins preparation of his apple cider glazed pork loin. The dish won first place in the Sun Winefest Chef Showdown at the Mohegan Sun. (Photo by Donald Eng)

Trumbull residents looking for an award-winning dining experience don't have to venture far. In fact, they don't have to leave town.

Michael Dunton, senior sous chef at J. Porters Restaurant in the Trumbull Marriott, was the winner of the Sun Winefest Chef Showdown, a statewide competition held Jan. 30 at the Mohegan Sun casino. The top prize included a cash award, a custom chef's coat and a feature story in Hartford Magazine.

For Dunton, the win was the culmination of a life-long passion for cooking.

"I first got interested in cooking well before high school, helping out in the kitchen," he said. "I always knew I wanted to be a chef. I never wanted to be anything else."

It was a natural career choice for Dunton, whose family owns several restaurants. After graduating from his high school's culinary program, the Massachusetts native earned a business degree from Fisher College in Boston before landing a job as a line cook at the Marriott in Quincy, Mass.

Two years later, the company promoted him to assistant sous chef at the Newton, Mass. hotel. Two years after that, his career took him to Trumbull.

Dunton said he took some lumps working at the busy Newton hotel. But the experience of preparing banquet meals for thousands of guests prepared him for the finals of the Chef Showdown, where he and the other finalist had 30 minutes to prepare their contest entries for a panel of judges.

Dunton prepared apple cider-brined, wood-grilled pork sirloin, maple-glazed pork ribs, acorn squash and mascarpone risotto. In awarding Dunton the top prize, the judges cited

the bold flavor and overall presentation of the dish. (See Dunton prepare his award-winning meal in an upcoming episode of Trumbull Topics on Trumbull's Education Channel)

The original recipe will debut as a special at J. Porters later this month as the restaurant prepares to introduce an all-new menu featuring what Dunton calls American fusion cuisine.

“As a hotel restaurant, we try to feature items that will be familiar to people from all over the country,” he said. “Then, we put our own twist on them and make them unique. So if they order a traditional meatloaf, it’ll be sort of like Mom’s, but different.”

A hotel restaurant also faces a unique challenge in creating a menu that appeals to clients who may be eating there 100 times a year or more.

“Business travelers may spend 200 nights a year in hotels,” Dunton said. “A customer like that has very high expectations that we have to meet consistently.”

At 28, Dunton is still in the early stages of his culinary career. Ultimately, he said that running his own kitchen is a long-term goal, and employment with a hotel chain as large as Marriott offers numerous opportunities to experience life in different locations. Still, he doesn’t plan to stray too far from the area where he grew up.

“Culinarily, the Northeast part of the country has always been the place to be,” he said. “As a chef, it’s challenging to work in an area where the seasons affect the local availability of ingredients. When you can create a menu to feature the spring vegetables, and the traditional fall dishes, it’s exciting.”