

The Times-Picayune
THE NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATEOUTLET:
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Americas Selection USA wins

At the 'World Cup of cuisine,' Team USA wins big and New Orleans culinary scene shines

Writer: Ian McNulty

Before the gold, silver and bronze medals were awarded at the three-tiered podium, and before the competitors in their gleaming white chef coats and tall toques took the stage holding their national flags among a crowd of cheering supporters, New Orleans chefs were already jubilant.

They'd been watching all weekend as teams of top chefs representing countries across North and South America contended for peak culinary awards, while also rubbing elbows with visiting celebrity chefs, some regarded as rock stars by those who value tasting menus over concert tickets.

All of this culinary firepower was in New Orleans for twin global contests, Bocuse d'Or and Coupe du Monde de la Patisserie (a.k.a. the Pastry World Cup). Teams were competing to make it to their respective finals, to be held in Lyon, France, in January, an event regarded as the World Cup of cuisine.

These local competitions were qualifying rounds, and New Orleans chefs and restaurateurs attending to watch and help produce the events called them a win for the city's own culinary identity.

"It brings such great energy, with all these chefs and food enthusiasts here," said Alon Shaya, chef and co-owner of Saba and Safta's Table restaurants.

"New Orleans is such a great place for people who love food and hospitality to visit, and for a lot of them this was their first time experiencing that. I think it just multiplies the possibilities for New Orleans," he said.

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Wins for USA, NOLA

After the weekend's performance, USA teams swept both categories and will advance to the finals. Pastry Team USA won the gold medal in the Americas round on Saturday and Bocuse d'Or Team USA won gold on Sunday.

Each team is composed of chefs from around the country, who take leave from high-profile restaurant positions to represent their country.

While still not as well known in the U.S., Bocuse d'Or and Pastry World Cup are followed obsessively by chefs and culinary aficionados around the world.

New Orleans first hosted a qualifying round for each in 2024, marking the first time they were held in any North American location. Event organizers said it was a move to increase its visibility in new markets.

It's also an opportunity the local tourism marketing and sales agency New Orleans & Co. campaigned heavily to get. Alice Glenn, the tourism group's executive vice president, said hosting the competitions is part of a larger strategy to elevate the city's profile as a global travel destination and a culinary center of excellence.

"There's no better way to do that than bringing the best chefs in the world here," she said.

"They're meeting people, seeing young chefs on the rise, seeing the dining scene as it is today. This is how catalytic things happen."

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Local chefs attending the competitions agreed. Some called the events another reflection of the city's growing reputation as a creative hub of rising talent, along with other milestones like New Orleans' debut in the Michelin Guide last fall and hosting the North America's 50 Best Restaurants ceremony last spring.

"I think it's showing that New Orleans is not just a legacy food city but a place where people are reinventing it," said Kaitlin Guerin, pastry chef and owner of Lagniappe Bakehouse in Central City. "It shows we're on the map for what we are now, not just for the past."

World Cup of cuisine

The events were held in conjunction with Louisiana Restaurant Association's annual trade show, and turned one part of the convention center into an arena-style competition kitchen. Fans and family members who had traveled with the teams and trade show attendees packed the room, many wearing their national colors, waving small flags and ringing noise makers and bells in zealous support.

By contrast, the chefs pursued their work with laser focus and tight coordination, ever-aware that the clock was ticking and that the judges, all acclaimed chefs, were circulating to watch their performance. Familiar ingredients are transformed into works of culinary art. Team USA's winning platter for the Pastry World Cup round, for instance, was a diorama of dinosaurs and prehistoric plants that covered an entire table.

One prominent chef in attendance was Jérôme Bocuse, the chef who continues the legacy of his father Paul Bocuse, the revered godfather of modern French cuisine who first created Bocuse d'Or in the 1980s. He was effusive in his praise of New Orleans as host city, citing its historic connection to France and vibrant food culture.

"When we came here two years ago, I didn't think it could be possible to do it better, but this year it was," Bocuse said.