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All We Can Eat

The Food section serves up recipe tips, food trends and more.



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- Red Fruit Festival hits, and a miss
- To Market, to Market: An elementary choice
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- Market Roundup: Sept. 23-Sept. 29

Entries By Category

- Beer
- Books
- Bumper Crop
- CSA Scout
- Chat Leftovers
- Chefs
- Comfort Food
- Comment of the Week
- Cooking for One
- Flour Girl
- Food Politics
- Food labeling
- Good to Go
- Groundwork
- Gut Check
- I Spice
- In Season
- Markets This Week
- Media
- On Our Radar
- Recipes
- Say Cheese
- Shopping
- Smoke Signals
- Spirits
- Staff Favorites
- Sustainable Food
- Tales of the Testers
- Television
- Thanksgiving

Red Fruit Festival hits, and a miss

Friday night's first [Mid-Atlantic Red Fruit Festival](#) sent tomato season out in glorious fashion. A call for recipes from the community and subsequent collaboration between 13 finalists and chefs resulted in moist micro cupcakes, jammy reductions, intensely flavored soups, a tart that's going straight into my summer file and a winner that involved almost no cooking at all.

Organizer and Equinox restaurateur Ellen Kassoff Gray had hoped for a fun event that highlighted local produce, and the 300-plus crowd in the Pavilion Room at the Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center was happy and well fed by 8 p.m. However, there's a learning curve in putting on any annual program for the first time; it appeared to go off without a hitch, but there was a regrettable absence among the contestants.



Zynooda executive chef Mike Lund, left, and Stratford University culinary student Jeremy Seeley plate Jessica Sidman's Green Tomato Marbled Goat Cheese Ice Cream in black pepper tuiles. (Jessica Sidman)

Leesburg resident **Rosemary Lawler** was not at chef **Kaz Okochi's** side as he and an assistant ladled out helpings of what was billed as Lawler's [Cream of Tomato Soup With Seafood](#). If the recipe sounds familiar, that's because it won the Food section's 2010 Top Tomato contest in August.

Okochi, of [Kaz Sushi Bistro](#) and [Masa 14](#), communicated with Lawler solely via e-mail. The back and forth began Sept. 15 with questions and ended Sept. 24 with misunderstandings. It was perhaps not the best fit of cooking styles and seasonality, Kassoff Gray said in hindsight.

The chef chose to work with plum tomatoes that weren't as juicy as Lawler's home-grown, height-of-the-summer specimens. He had never used corn cobs in broth but was interested to try it. But the corn he found was not sweet. He was hesitant to use the cream and butter called for, wishing to make a lighter soup in the throes of a sticky Indian summer. Her combination of cheese and seafood gave him pause.

When Lawler assessed the sum of adaptations, she felt the soup would be significantly altered. "It's not my soup," she said, politely but firmly.

By the time Kassoff Gray was cc'ed on the last exchange – the day before the event – she suggested Lawler ought to "go with it;) have fun!" Lawler's husband sent Okochi an unsigned e-mail in defense of the original recipe, and that's when the wheels really fell off. The chef used some ALL CAPS in his reply, explaining that the professional chefs could "cook as we like," and that he would rather take his three gallons of soup to a homeless shelter than attend the festival. Lawler and many friends who had planned to head into Washington against rush-hour traffic stayed home.

"I re-read the contest rules," Lawler said. "Am I the only one to experience this?"

Yes and no. Other collaborations were smoother, probably because ingredients were enhanced rather than swapped out so substantially. Chefs tweaked the recipes by balancing acidity – something almost every one of them mentioned as I made the rounds as an event judge.

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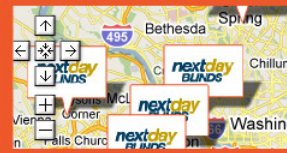
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[Equinox's Todd Gray](#) upped the presentation factor of [David Tarre's](#) Nuovo Caprese With Corn-Fried Mozzarella, and made it easier to hand out small portions, by choosing small heirlooms and tomatillos instead of large ones and green tomatoes. Gray used basil powder instead of basil oil and garnished with tender basil shoots and smoked sea salt.

[Zynodas's Mike Lund](#) created black-pepper tiles for serving [Jessica Sidman's](#) Green Tomato Marbled Goat Cheese Ice Cream and topped it with crushed corn nuts and peeled grape tomatoes marinated in sweetened rice wine vinegar.

Trade center catering chef [Xavier Deshayes](#) and [April Fulton](#) talked by phone four times about refinements to her Tomato Tarte dessert: a reduction of balsamic vinegar, a mint simple syrup, candied mint garnish, a hint of lavender and, the most successful game changer, a thin crust made with hazelnut flour instead of a sweet pastry crust. Its yellow tomatoes were sliced mandoline-thin. Displaying a little home-court advantage savvy, Deshayes and his crew created the best-looking table by resting a glass top on bricks at the four corners, and filling the space beneath with rows of ripe red tomatoes.

"The candied mint might be more than you would do at home," Fulton smiled. "But I think it all worked. I'm happy with it."

Then again, [RJ Cooper](#) called contestant [Olga Berman](#) and said "I'll just do it straight up." He used late-season seconds, sourced a good cherry balsamic vinegar and avocado oil to produce her Roasted Tomato and Balsamico Soup.

Even small changes can be make-or-break ones. Each of the past four years in our own Top Tomato competition, recipes have come *thisclose* to greatness. A pinch of seasoning or attention to texture or that balance of acidity the chefs were striving to achieve would alter the course of history, so to speak. But we made the decision to test the entries as written.

That was not the case for Red Fruit. Because I had tasted Lawler's soup made according to her original recipe, I can say that Okochi's version did not taste the same. In the end, he used half the cream and a little butter at the finish. The yogurt substitution (for the other half of the cream) made the soup tangier, and there was a noticeable vegetable crunch. For me, it missed on big tomato flavor. His soup was not a favorite among my fellow judges.

Chefs make such events look easy, but this festival asked a lot of them, in terms of their own time and money. Okochi said it took about 10 hours of experimenting and cooking to deliver the soup on Friday. And although dishes were divided among five categories, only the top three vote-getters and a crowd favorite were awarded prizes. It's tough to pit sweet against savory.

The winner relied on pure flavor and an bit of chill originality. [Maria Alvarez](#), a 38-year-old Buxton resident and comptroller for the Baltimore Convention Center, won with her Bloody Mary.

"I don't even like that kind of cocktail, usually," she said. But she had concocted a batch with jalapeno, horseradish, Old Bay, a citrus vodka and fleur de sel for friends who loved it. They urged her to enter, and she was paired with Equinox bar manager [Simo Ahmadi](#) and Baltimore's [B&O brasserie](#) mixologist [Brendan Dorr](#).

Dorr reduced the level of spiciness; he and Ahmadi added ice cubes of cucumber juice, lime juice and simple syrup. Magic, with a few drops of olive oil and sprinkle of fleur de sel to finish the drink. When a single cube melts into a small serving, it tempers the cocktail's heat.

To make the ice cubes at home, Dorr recommends using the juice of two cukes, the juice of one lime and a few ounces of simple syrup for each batch; double or triple amounts as needed. Freeze the mixture in ice cube trays. I crunched through a few leftover cubes afterward and can see how the mixture would be nice as a palate-cleansing granita.

The Lawler-Okochi misfire won't alter plans for next year's recipe contest, but Kassoff Gray said she would "be sure to make the rules and expectations clear to everybody." She planned to follow up with Lawler and close things on a better note.

The red fruit to be celebrated in 2011 might change to watermelon or red bell peppers. If it holds at tomatoes, I'm one tomato lover who would like to see the final collaborated recipes -- in addition to the originals -- posted on the festival's blog.


-- Bonnie S. Benwick


By [Bonnie S. Benwick](#) | September 27, 2010; 10:00 AM ET
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