



## Living Yama Zukura is the best

Competition to find Worcester's top chef leads to fusion cuisine  
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# Bragging rights



T&G Staff/MARK C. IDE

Yama Zakura Sushi Bar and Fusion Cuisine owner Laddavanh "Anna" Bouphavichith says she didn't know about the Worcester's Best Chef competition until one of her regular customers convinced her to enter. Good thing: Yama Zakura took the first-place Judges' Award.

## Yama Zakura wows 'em at Best Chef

By Barbara M. Houle  
FOOD EDITOR



Since I share everything I know about the local food scene with you, I guess it's OK to dish some inside dirt about Worcester's Best Chef competition held Sunday at Worcester Technical High School.

I can hear the moans and groans out there now.

Twenty-two restaurants competed for the Judges' Award and the People's Choice Award. Originally, there were more than 25 competitors but a few dropped off along the way. I was told one of the chefs had a "knife accident" at his restaurant. I didn't ask for details. It's not clear what happened to the others. One restaurant was a no-show the day of the event.

The United States Army was the main sponsor, according to organizer was Domenic D. Mercurio Jr., president of Mercury Media & Entertainment in Worcester. Other heavy hitters joined the bandwagon, too. The wines were amazing.

Food, wine, scotch and champagne put hundreds of



Photos/SCOTT ERB

Above, Laddavanh "Anna" Bouphavichith, wearing glasses, and Michael Banks, behind her. At left, Bouphavichith and her crew celebrate their win at Worcester's Best Chef.



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 2, 2008

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A2

Wind to bring  
lots of sunshine  
High 63, low 43**Living**  
**Yama Zakura**  
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WORCESTER



MASSACHUSETTS

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60 CENTS

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# Slow Food Gala to use local, seasonal ingredients

Slow Food/From Page E1

guests in a party mood. The school was alive with music, salsa dancing, radio and TV hosts, and toastmaster Jeremy Bell from Scotland, who played the bagpipes and showed guests how to "uncork" a \$90 bottle of Perrier-Jouet Champagne with a 4-foot sword. Culinary students from Worcester Technical High School shadowed chefs and also presented dishes to the judges during the blind tasting. The kids got an education that night.

The first-place Judges' Choice Award went to Yama Zakura Sushi Bar and Fusion Cuisine, 369 W. Main St., Northboro. Owner Laddavanh "Anna" Boupvichith told me she didn't even know about the competition until one of her regular customers, Michael Banks, chef/instructor at Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School in Fitchburg, convinced her to enter. "I didn't think I made the deadline because I went online two weeks before the show," Boupvichith said. "I thought exposure would be good, but I never thought of winning," she said. Surprise, surprise.

As one of the judges, I can honestly say Yama Zakura's Tuna Trio scored high in taste, presentation, creativity and components on my card. You know the saying, "You eat with your eyes." It's true. The appetizers, Wasabi Crunch, Yummy Yama Nachos and Tuna Tekiyaki, were individually plated on a bamboo mat with chopsticks. To the left of the dishes was a small jar filled with Kaffir lime leaf, fresh thyme, kumquat and Thai chili pepper, all edible and grown by Boupvichith, which at the time none of the judges knew. The jar represented the name Yama Zakura, or mountain flower, according to the chef. Dry ice in the jar provided the steam or fog on the mountain, Boupvichith said. Who knew?

About the chef: Boupvichith of Worcester came to the United States from Laos 25 years ago. She has an engineering degree but always loved to cook and eat sushi at high-end restaurants. Boupvichith has worked at Yama Zakura since it opened four years ago. She has owned the business for 2½ years. Her menu, she said, is a reflection of herself. "I incorporate ingredients that I like into dishes," she said. "The artist in me comes out when I plate the food."

Soulisack Bounnaphol, a culinary student at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, assists the chef at Yama Zakura.

Boupvichith said a rep from the Food Network once told her she could be another Rachael Ray. "I love to talk, talk, and I know all my customers by name. I know where they work and about their families," she said. "We're family. I told them (the customers) that if I won Worcester's Best Chef I would double my prices." Just joking!

She also made a bet with Michael Banks, the guy who talked her into competing.

Well, Banks is heading to the night shift at Yama Zakura. "He's coming in for two weeks," Boupvichith said. "That was the bet. It's crazy here. Sometimes there's a two-hour wait. Mike might not even get a break."

Boupvichith gets the better half of the deal. For a few hours she teaches Banks' students everything she knows about sushi. Lucky them.

Hours at Yama Zakura: lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; dinner, 4:30 to 9:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday; 4:30 to 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 4:30 to 8:30 Sunday. Closed Mondays. Beer, wine and cordials. Catering available.

Reservations highly recommended for this 43-seat restaurant; call (508) 393-4187.

Wilson Wang and Mike Zhang, co-owners of Baba Restaurant and Sushi Bar in Wor-

cester, walked away with the People's Choice Award at the competition. Congrats! The restaurant took the first-prize Judges' Award last year.

Other big winners:  
Judges' Choice Award: runner-up, Via Alto 27 in Clinton, chef Matrias Farias; second runner-up, Cedar Street Restaurant in Sturbridge, executive chef/owner William Nemeroff.

People's Choice Award: runner-up, Rovezzi's Ristorante in Sturbridge, executive chef/owner Christopher Rovezzi; second runner-up, Cedar Street Restaurant in Sturbridge, executive chef/owner William Nemeroff.

Judges: Stanley J. Nicas, executive chef/owner of the Castle Restaurant in Leicester; Paul Wilson, executive chef at Pepper's Fine Foods Catering in Northboro; David Vadenais of Sturbridge, executive chef, PFG (Performance Food Group) in Springfield; Michelle Bohigian, pastry chef/owner of Sweets by Michelle in Worcester; Christina Andrianopoulos, radio host with Allan Eisenberg, Dining Out Metrowest (WCRN 830); Barbara M. Houle, Telegram & Gazette food editor; and Judy Mattera of Boston, pastry chef/consultant of Sweet Solutions, Dessert and Sweet Wine Pairings.

The skinny on the judges: We

arrived at 2 p.m. and completed scoring after 5 p.m. The judges see a presentation plate before tasting small, plated portions. As usual, the portions were too large. The chefs have a hard time cutting them down. By the time the 15th entry was plunked down in front of us, one of the judges kidded, "Are they trying to kill us off?"

Thanks to all the competitors on behalf of the judges. You did a great job! Large-size jackets and elastic waistbands helped us through it!