

FOOD



Contender rattles pans in Europe's kitchens

An up-and-coming Australian has taken on the world's best chefs, writes **Rachel Lebihan**.

They train intensively for months if not years, hire gold medallists to put them through their paces, then go head-to-head with contenders from around the globe. Welcome to the culinary olympics.

Pitted against the Europeans with their centuries-old culinary heritage and sponsorship deals of about \$US1 million (\$1.4 million), Australian chefs are the underdogs who accept the challenge on little more than a whiff of an oily apron and an appetite for adventure.

Everything from gold trophies and cash prizes to international kudos are up for grabs. Book deals and international job offers are drawcards, too. But the Aussie contenders say if they help put Australia on the world culinary map it has been worthwhile.

The Bocuse d'Or is considered the unofficial chefs' world championship; the profession's most prestigious award.

Named after renowned French chef Paul Bocuse, who founded the competition more than 20 years ago, it's held biennially in Lyon, France. Candidates from 24 nations competed in January. Rattling the pans for Australia was Luke Croston, 27.

Driven to test his skills against some of the world's best chefs, Croston was still running on adrenalin days after the event.

"It's the biggest competition in the world. It's a mixing pot of different countries, of culinary skills, so it's a massive learning curve," Croston says, his words barrelling out like plates through the pass at the height of service.

Competitors had to prepare a main course of 14 portions using Norwegian deep-sea prawns, cod and scallops, and a main course using Aberdeen black Angus beef – all in 5½ hours and in view of thousands of spectators.

Croston, accompanied by commis chef Simon Consentino, prepared cod fillets with a prawn "crocodile skin", salted cod brandad filling and an Australian macadamia nut butter.

The meat main course was Angus rib smoked with eucalyptus leaf, tomato and onion compote with slow-cooked ox cheek. A grilled fillet of Angus with spiced and grilled eggplant filling completed the dish.

Presented in the manner of a haute couture fashion show, on huge silver trays paraded in front of the judges, each main course had three garnishes.

And forget a sprig of parsley. Croston describes one of his as "Sydney Harbour Bridge potato fondant, caper marinated King George whiting and king brown mushrooms". Croston trained for six months, including eight weeks with former Bocuse d'Or champion Serge Vieira.

A committee of professional chefs from Crown Melbourne provided kitchen space and lined up suppliers as sponsors.

Coming up with techniques and a work flow to create the dishes within the tough time frame was the hardest part.

"That was the really demanding and challenging part because it's long days, it's repetition over and over again," Croston says.

"It does get tiresome, but you need to do that repetition so it becomes second nature. There are a lot of distractions on the day."

Norway, Sweden and France won gold, silver and bronze. Croston came 12th. He was also placed 12th in 2007.

He's disappointed but honoured to have made the grand final and the competition has certainly opened some doors.

Croston first competed in 2003



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as assistant to George Calombaris of The Press Club in Melbourne, and went on to work at Calombaris' restaurant, Reserve.

Croston also worked at Crown Melbourne's the brasserie, owned by Philippe Mouchel, himself a protégé of Paul Bocuse, in the lead-up to this year's event. He has stayed in France to work for Vieira, who won the Bocuse d'Or 2005.

President of Bocuse d'Or Australia and executive general manager of food and beverage at Crown Melbourne, Walter Wagner, believes the competition raises the bar for the Australian profession.

"This has given Luke exposure to some of the top chefs in Europe... keeping in mind that he will eventually come back to Australia and come back with a whole portfolio of ideas and experience which otherwise he wouldn't have had, so indirectly it's benefiting the whole of the industry in Australia," Wagner says.

European countries have

Winning chef Geir Skeie of Norway, above. Left, Australia's entrant Luke Croston, right, with commis chef Simon Consentino. Photo AFP

previously won the top three Bocuse d'Or prizes: gold €20,000 (\$39,000), silver €15,000 and bronze €10,000.

Wagner says Australian contenders are at their biggest disadvantage financially.

Australian sponsorship of about \$100,000 was secured this year, whereas some teams raised \$US500,000 to \$US1 million.

John Lanzafame agrees that Australia's participation in culinary competitions is hindered by lack of sponsorship. The 37-year-old owner and chef at Lanzafame Trattoria, in Sydney's Star City Casino, was in the Australian team that competed at the 22nd Culinary Olympics at Erfurt in Germany last year.

Teams cooked a three-course meal for 110 people in four hours.

The Culinary Olympics are held every four years and countries lift their ranking by participating in regional grand prix events. The top 32 nations compete.

Norway won last year. Australia's senior team won two gold medals, one silver and came ninth in the world.

Not bad for one of the teams with the lowest levels of sponsorship, says Lanzafame.

"The Norwegian team quits work two years before the Olympics and the government supports them on a full wage," he says. "They had two coaches and their own kitchen built in the vicinity of the competition, while we rocked up driving two hired Mercedes Benz vans, carting our own food around."

Lanzafame won the best pizza chef title at The America's Plate competition and the One World chef championship in Iceland. He published a book, *Pizza modo mio*, after winning the world pizza championship.