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Chefs turn up heat in pastry contest

Opryland hosts magical creations

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When the final bell sounded at 2 p.m., 13 frenetic hours of sugar-fueled activity came to a screeching halt.

The nine teams at the National Team Pastry Championships were instructed to stop work, but their most precarious maneuver remained at the end of the two-day competition hosted by Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center.

They had to move their final sugar-and-chocolate showpieces a mere 2 feet from their kitchen workspace to the display table. That narrow gap presented a harrowing challenge because many showpieces towered more than 6 feet in height, held together only by sugar and chocolate.

Indeed, one team's showpiece collapsed amid the groans of the crowd intently watching every move.

Most spectators packed every bit of space at one end of the line of kitchens, seeking a vantage point to watch what was simply referred to as "the French team." Arguably the best and most experienced, the three executive pastry chefs moved with fluid confidence, having practiced for months and done more than six full run-throughs.



Chocolate guitar a hit

Captained by Laurent Branlard of Walt Disney World Swan & Dolphin Hotel, with Frederic Monti of The Greenbrier Resort and Stéphane Tréand of St. Regis Resort, their chocolate guitar, airbrushed with a likeness of Tim McGraw and decorated with vibrant painted chocolate sunflowers, was a showstopper. Next to their abstract sugar figure, with two white sugar hands suspended over a banjo, and brilliant green supports arcing upward, the two pieces taken together clearly won the audience's award.

Next to Team Branlard, Team Caldwell kept steady pace, not revealing their showpieces until the very end. Led by Jin Caldwell of Ethel M chocolates in Las Vegas, it was the first all-female team ever to compete at the Nationals. Along with Kristina Karlicki of the Daniel Boulud Brasserie at the Wynn Resort and Sally Camacho of Mandalay Bay, their interpretation of "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" took dark chocolate to an evil place, with tentacles and ribs tempting the audience. In sugar though, a giant golden sun, rising through a clear flame panel represented Johnny's defeat of the devil and their own hopes for success.

The competition was created in 1999 by Michael Schneider, president of Carymax and publisher of trade magazines *Pastry Art & Design*, *Frozen Desserts* and *Chocolatier*. After stints in Beaver Creek, Las Vegas and Phoenix, Nashville was chosen because it was a midsize market with a large-scale venue.

The winner of the Nationals, Team Branlard, will return to Nashville and Gaylord Opryland next summer to compete in the World Team Pastry Championships.