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James Beard Foundation's All-Stars Wow Phoenix

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And then lead cooking demonstrations at Sur La Table

It's one thing to call yourself a foodie — to watch all the shows, eat at all the restaurants, try all the kitchen hacks. It's quite another to say you've been in a room of award-winning chefs who were handpicked to create and serve dishes as part of the James Beard Foundation's annual Taste America tour. My experience at the Phoenix leg of the Foundation's cross-country program on September 22 moved me from the former to the latter.

The Phoenix event, which was held at Mountain Shadows Resort in Paradise Valley, was just the first stop of the **10-city tour**. The next stops are October 6 and 7, in Los Angeles and New Orleans, with more cities to follow. And if the other stops are anything like Phoenix, well, attendees are in for a treat.

The annual event is not just a way to celebrate each city's vibrant local chefs and cuisine; it's also a way to provide scholarship funds for up-and-coming chefs.

The evening began with hors d'oeuvres prepared by local chefs. Aaron Chamberlin of **St. Francis** and **Public Market Cafe** created a white gazpacho with Arizona grapes. A cool dish, he said, that worked perfectly with the Phoenix heat — and wouldn't overheat the guests wearing jackets. Dustin Christofolo of **Quiessence at The Farm at South Mountain** went with his mom's favorite dish: a beef carpaccio made with Arizona beef. Lori Hashimoto of **Hana Japanese Eatery** decided to use a traditional Japanese technique with a non-traditional ingredient, making a tataki-style smoked duck. Branden Levine of **Sel Restaurant** turned one of my favorite N'awlins-style dishes, dirty rice, on its head by making it with barbecue-grilled octopus and duck liver. Food Network alum Beau MacMillan of **Elements at Sanctuary** went with a vodka- and citrus-cured salmon atop a sweet pea pancake with a bit of Tabasco for a touch of heat. Guests washed down their bites with wines and a signature cocktail, the Spotted Frog, made with Glass vodka.

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Local chefs and JBF All-Stars came together to prepare a feast in Phoenix.

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The chefs who made it all happen.

If the reception menu was any indication, we knew the dinner wouldn't disappoint. And in case anyone was concerned, the evening's host reminded us that the night wasn't the time to worry about how much we ate.

"Phoenix has always been part of Taste America," said host Sean McLaughlin, a news anchor with Phoenix's CBS 5 News. "We've gone from a food desert to a food destination. (Tonight) is a chance to step off the treadmill and enjoy life."

And that we did. Guests were treated to live, behind-the-scenes footage of the chefs as they worked on each course.

First up was Charles Wiley with a vegetarian kabocha squash ravioli. Wiley is head chef at **Hearth '61**, the onsite restaurant of the evening's host hotel. Taste America local star chef Nobuo Fukuda of **Nobuo at Teeter House** created his take on fish n' chips, which included potato starch-fried cod inside of an (edible) fried karei bone. The final dish of the evening was a flatiron steak (declared by my husband to be probably the best steak he's ever had) prepared by Taste America all-star chef and James Beard Award winner Traci Des Jardins of **Jardinière San Francisco**.

Throughout dinner, speaker and author Letitia Frye served as the evening's auctioneer, auctioning off culinary packages to raise money for the scholarship program.

After dinner, guests were treated to coffee and dessert, which included a browned butter-cocoa cake with banana pudding and a chocolate-coconut pastiche from Tammie Coe of Tammie Coe Cakes; a honey chiffon cake and spiced chocolate layer cake from Country Velador of Super Chunk Sweets & Treats; and a strawberry fudge sundae with Tabasco-spiced white chocolate fudge and a fig-goat cheese ice cream and rosemary-bacon sandwich from Cassie Weisz of Churn.

Between the desserts and the celebratory fireworks shot into the desert sky, the event truly set the stage for the rest of the Taste America tour.

"Phoenix is really a place, I think, that speaks to the heart of what food in America is today," said Mitchell Davis, executive vice president of the James Beard Foundation.

And all of us Phoenix foodies just happen to agree.

Visit **Taste America** for ticket information for events in your city. For behind-the-scenes action, be sure to follow #JBFTasteAmerica and @BeardFoundation on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.