

taste



ONO HAS BEEN incorporating more and more Asian accents into his dishes. 'I'm more comfortable with who I am as a chef now.'

## And this year's top chef is—'who?'

**No one expected 28-year-old Makoto Ono of Winnipeg to take home the gold at Whistler**

**BY SASHA CHAPMAN** • When it comes to competitive cooking, truffles and foie gras are considered the slam dunk: slather them on just about anything (risotto, shepherd's pie) and the dish is sure to win. They're the culinary equivalent, Toronto chef Chris McDonald once said, of a black negligee.

So it was no surprise to find the prestigious Canadian Culinary Championships in Whistler, B.C., riddled with said ingredients. Chefs from across the country had gathered to compete and raise more than \$700,000 for Gold Medal Plates, which funds Olympic and Paralympic athletes. The odds favoured the celebrities: Mark McEwan of Toronto, who brought the camera crew from his popular TV show, *The Heat*, to film the competition, Michael Blackie of Ottawa's moneyed Brookstreet Hotel and Vancouver trendsetter Robert Clark.

As each chef introduced his creation—truffle foam with this, foie gras mousse with that—each dish sounded more over-the-top than the last. Until Makoto Ono, a 28-year-old from Winnipeg, stepped up. Ono, who moves with the slouch of a teenager and sports a spiked mullet, had none of the polish or showmanship of his predecessors—men who were his culinary heroes. He cleared his throat and hung his head. "Wow," he said. "My dish doesn't have any foie gras or truffles in it. I wanted to make something simple, something you could make at home."

Sure, the ingredients sounded simple: pork tenderloin with soy and ginger, smashed spuds topped with smoky matchstick potatoes, an apple-radish salad with yogourt and apple chips. Everyone's heart went out to the guy who couldn't afford to courier up crabs from the coast. But Ono's description was deceptive. Each element was a miniature still

life, and the flavours had an essential purity rarely found in Western restaurant food. To nearly everyone's surprise, Ono took home the gold, with nary a truffle in sight.

Although Ono was born and raised in Winnipeg, he had a traditional Japanese upbringing, studying taiko (percussion) and packing sushi and grilled sardines for school lunches. "It was hard being different. Burgers and pasta were a real treat," he recalls. In 1991, Ono's father, Sadao, who had spent 10 years training as a sushi master in Japan, opened Edohei, Winnipeg's first Japanese restaurant. Ono, 13, was expected to help out—washing dishes, prepping in the kitchen. "I hated it. I was always looking for an excuse to go to the comic book stores. It was a way to escape."

Ono began drawing his own stories, eventually studying fine arts at the University of Manitoba. Then his father called him to the sushi bar. Everything changed for Ono. "It was the first time I was out in front of customers, seeing their reaction. It was instant gratification. I loved it." He dropped out of art school and spent two years making sushi. Then he enrolled at the Dubrulle Culinary Arts Program in Vancouver—to study classical French. "My parents were really upset. They couldn't understand why I'd want to learn something new when I didn't even know how to cook Japanese."

When Ono graduated, he continued study-

ing French, working at La Vieille Gare in Winnipeg and then for a year in London at the Michelin-starred Mirabelle, owned by *enfant terrible* Marco Pierre White. (White once cut the clothes off a cook with a knife when he complained the kitchen was too hot.) When Ono came back to Winnipeg, the prodigal son returned to his father's restaurant. "By then, my dad was convinced that I was serious about cooking." Sadao even let him change the menus to incorporate some newly learned French techniques.

In 2004, while Ono was still helping out his dad, entrepreneur Jameson Watermulder, 27, came calling. Watermulder wanted to launch Gluttons, an ambitious gourmet shop with a 12-table restaurant. The menu would be a \$56 four-course prix fixe, which was almost unheard of in Winnipeg. "The money is there—you see people driving \$100,000 vehicles to the McDonald's drive-through," says Watermulder. "But it's still hard to convince Winnipeggers to spend \$56 on a meal." Nevertheless, reservations at Gluttons are increasingly hard to come by, especially since the Gold Medal Plates win.

Ono is currently contemplating a restaurant consulting gig in Philadelphia, which has some Winnipeggers worried. "There's been a real buzz since the competition," says Jeff Gill, an instructor in the culinary arts program at Winnipeg's Red River College who has known Ono since he was a kid. "He's in the spotlight now." M



### TODAY'S SPECIAL... LENTEN FAST FOOD

To help the religious through the privations of Lent, KFC has created the Fish Snacker sandwich for, as a corporate press release states, "American Catholics who want to observe Lenten traditions while still leading busy lifestyles." Made of pollock and tartar sauce, the sandwich may yet come with a celebrity endorsement. KFC's president, Gregg Dedrick, has written Pope Benedict XVI, asking for a papal blessing on the Snacker.