

Local smackdown

Fresh or French, Duxbury or Chile, yea or nay say these 10 tasters

By [Ike DeLorenzo](#)

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Local farm eggs with white truffle oil and lemon aioli. Maisie Crow for *The Boston Globe*

CAMBRIDGE - It's a warm summer night and I'm at Central Kitchen in Central Square being schooled by chef and owner Gary Strack on the fine art of eating well in Massachusetts. Strack is about twice my height, and I think he could pick me up with one arm. But that's hardly the reason I'm paying attention.

Strack and his staff have just made 12 rounds of twin dishes, one of each from local ingredients, its twin from the best available products grown or produced in California, Texas, other agricultural states, Chile, and Europe. Upstairs from Central Kitchen in The Enormous Room, a dozen guests are about to evaluate each pairing side by side. It's an elaborate, and very intriguing blind taste test: Made-in-Massachusetts vs. Best-in-the-World, accompanied by gin and vodka chasers (local vs. imported spirits, of course). Ah, food reporting. It's hard work sometimes.

The guests - judges, really - include well-known local chefs, food writers and bloggers, and non-foodie civilians. Each pair of identical dishes is brought out labeled only with a number (1 or 2). Among the 10 guests are judges Pedja Kostic of Iggy's Bread of the World in Cambridge; Deborah Hansen, chef and owner of Taberna de Haro in Brookline; Christine Liu, a Boston food blogger; April Harrington of Stoneham; Nick Hoehn, an operations manager at [boston.com](#); and Eric Richmond, cofounder of Rigital Networks in Cambridge.

We start with sparkling wine, and everyone receives two unmarked glasses. One is Westport Rivers Blanc de Blancs, the other Perrier-Jouet Grand Brut (French champagne). The chefs and foodies prefer French ("more funk," "more subtle aromas," "older," "complex," even "European"), and also enjoy the Westport ("simple," "younger," "easy to drink," "fun"). Civilians overwhelmingly prefer Westport ("better hands down," "fruitier," "refreshing") and, surprisingly - remember, these are all blind tastes - they express universal distaste for what is widely regarded as excellent champagne ("bitter," "bad finish," "seltzery," "woody"). Westport is just more fun, if not as sophisticated. Clean, fresh, and simple - perfect with the briny oysters that come out next.

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The oyster course, a large platter of Island Creek oysters from Duxbury, and another of the famed Prince Edward Island oysters, is accompanied by cucumber and spring onion mignonette (a light sherry vinegar and white wine sauce traditionally spooned onto raw oysters). Not all the guests are oyster-lovers, or even oyster-eaters, but everyone tastes. Island Creeks were harvested that morning, and the PEIs were harvested six days before. For raw seafood, same-day is an inherent home-field advantage. But the slightly larger PEIs hold their own (“briny,” “exciting,” “lip-smacking”). Island Creeks win (“fresher,” “sweet and creamy,” “more body”). Did I say creamy already? I love the Island Creeks. As Kostic of Iggy’s says: “Both are differently delicious, it’s really a personal preference.” Here the crowd prefers locals more than 2-to-1.

We cleanse our palates with Berkshire Mountain Distillers’ Ice Glen Vodka from Great Barrington and Grey Goose from France. I gamely take a full shot of each. Ice Glen is quite good, pleasantly warm, though slightly alcohol-y. Grey Goose is simply better: sharp, crisp, eminently drinkable unmixed. Score one for France.

Now Strack starts showing off. He offers littleneck clams with spicy sausage and corn, one made with Pat Woodbury’s littlenecks, farmed in Wellfleet, pork sausage from Tendercrop Farm in Newbury, and freshly shucked corn kernels from Marini Farm in Ipswich. An identical bowl is made with supermarket ingredients. For this, and many of the dishes we taste, you would be satisfied with the versions cooked from big-agribusiness products. In this case, when you taste the local-only dish of seasonal corn, local clams, and fresh pork sausage, the combination is unbeatable. The salty taste and creamy texture of the clams are met by the crunchy, clean taste of the corn, and the earthiness of the pork.

It’s summer, so Strack grills lots of vegetables. Two brilliant platters appear, all brushed with olive oil (imported used on both; sadly, there are limits to what we can produce in the Northeast) and sea salt. Some are quite comparable in taste. For instance, there’s not a huge difference between the zucchini, carrots, red onion, and cauliflower on the two platters. Local tomatoes are markedly fresher and more flavorful. Surprisingly, most of the guests prefer the radishes from Texas (me among them), finding them “spicier,” “bigger,” “crunchier.”

Strack has added a few ringers to the local vegetable team: fresh scapes and zucchini flowers. Scapes are the unopened flowers and stems of the garlic plant, harvested before the bulb matures. The flavor is delicate, and the timing is critical. Scape season is near its end, and they are almost never in supermarkets. Zucchini flowers are delicious (they stay fresh for just one day after picking, so buy them at a farmers’ market). Hansen, of Taberna de Haro, calls these fragrant and floppy yellow blossoms “the vegetal expression of sunshine.” Stop rolling your eyes. She’s right.

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Locally grown red beets seem like a different vegetable from the traveled ones. Beet lovers are wowed (“sweeter,” “better texture,” “fresher”), and those who don’t like beets are rethinking their position (“oh, flavor!”).

Grilled striped bass (caught that morning near Duxbury) appears next, alongside Chilean sea bass. Both platters are garnished with fava bean puree made with beans from Parker Farm in Lunenburg and a bacon vinaigrette (bacon from Tendercrop Farm). The local fish is widely preferred: “fresh,” “meaty,” “firmer,” “wild texture,” “extraordinary taste.” Chilean sea bass (endangered and shipped from Chile, but I digress) is nonetheless sinfully smooth and delicious. But freshness really wins out here; nearly everyone enjoys both dishes, but prefers the striper.

As a special extra, Strack brings out farm-fresh finely diced eggs from Thatcher Farm in Milton, with white truffle oil and lemon aioli to illustrate how the quality of an ingredient can elevate a simple dish. Fresh eggs - often still warm from the coop - are a marvelous treat, with a rich satisfying flavor and fragrance and intense golden yolks.

Wood-grilled beef strip with local arugula and shaved smoked Gouda are next. Hoehn, who has little to say about various vegetables, likes the USDA prime steak. Then he tastes River Rock Farm beef, raised in Brimfield, and announces, “Oh, wow. This is really good. The first one is not even close.” Hoehn also has strong opinions about local beer, preferring Jack d’Or from The Pretty Things Beer and Ale Project in Cambridge - “brighter, kind of citrusy” - over a Belgian beer called Saison Dupont.

For the cheese course, Strack presents a few of the best in the state against others from France. Hillman Farm Birch Hill goat’s milk chevre from Colrain, and Westfield Farm Herb Capri chevre from Hubbardston are up against Valencay from Pays de la Loire and Pave Sauvage from Perigord, both in France. A French Roquefort from Midi-Pyrenees wins convincingly beside an overpowering Great Hill Blue from Marion.

Those who like the locals say they’re milder and creamier than the French; in some cases tasters are put off by aggressive spices or rinds. The best of the local is mozzarella from Fiore di Nonno in Somerville, which is fresh, crisp, and creamy all at the same time.

When you sample something in a blind test, you’re relying entirely on the taste of the food. When you taste at home or in a restaurant, you know what you’re getting, and it’s hard to ignore the chic of eating local, and the issues associated with carbon-footprint esoterica and the almighty O-word (organic).

At one point during the evening, a couple of the professional foodies decide, as a local rack of pork is brought out, that it can’t be local (we learn later that it is). The meat is big,

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glistening with fat and juices, and has beautifully parallel bones and a photo-ready shape. It's too pretty. "Hormones," says one foodie under her breath. Actually, it's naturally raised pork from Tendercrop. The other pork roast - smaller, lumpy, and oddly shaped - is from a Midwest processing plant. "Obviously this is the naturally raised one. It's smaller," offers the foodie (wrong again).

With expectations switched, the foodies sing the praises of the factory meat. "Notes of grass that the pig ate," "floral," "fit," "happy." And offer mixed reviews of the local nicer-looking one they think they should dislike ("tastes like chicken," "sawdust," and, inexplicably, "OK in a Proustian way."). Non-foodie April Harrington isn't having it. "The bigger one tastes better. It's juicier, and I like it better." Both were good, but I agree with Harrington. The Tendercrop Farm rack is juicier, with a fresh, light aroma, great texture, and delectable fat. The commodity pork is expertly prepared but by comparison bland, and, apparently, ready for over-interpretation.

Strack is finally done and joins us for clafoutis, the popular French cake, made with local blackberries. "The process is so much more than what is happening inside the pan, or what comes out of it," says the chef. "We had so much more fun than if we had simply tried to cook the best dinner. Foraging for the best ingredients . . . it makes the dinner so much more rich and rewarding."

As I collect the scorecards from the judges, I realize something I should have known from the beginning: Our imposing chef, the kitchen, and the guests win the smackdown. The food is a very close second.