

## 12.3.06 The Industry

Marys County contest made its debut in 1967 as a community fund-raiser; now National Oyster Shucking Championship is a registered trademark, and the event is sponsored by the likes of Comcast and Boeing.

Speed is only one element of a competition. Presentation is the other. According to rules set in place by the Galway contest (and to which most qualifying competitions worldwide adhere), penalty seconds are added to a shucker's completion time for a variety of fouls: if there are parts of the shell on the oyster meat; if it's not entirely severed from its shell; if there is blood on the oyster.

In speed and presentation, one of North America's top talents is Patrick McMurray, the owner of the Starfish Oyster Bed and Grill in Toronto. Twenty years ago, when he was thinking of applying to the local teacher's college, McMurray took a part-time job working at a raw bar. By 2002, he had won the World Championship and set a world record,

shucking 33 oysters in a minute. Now McMurray flies off to Singapore or Las Vegas most autumn weekends, competing against shuckers from Sweden, South Africa and Korea. In order to compete internationally, he must study other contestants' techniques and master the variations among the bivalves.

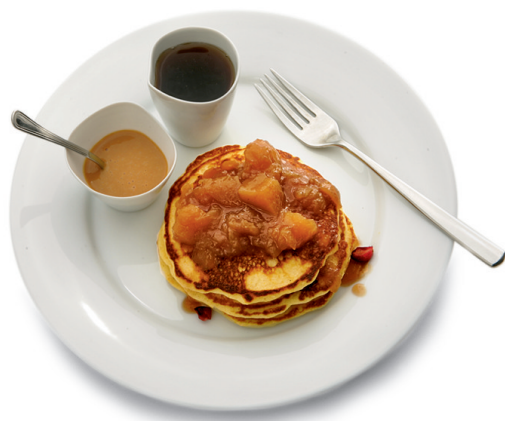
"The Swedes are thinking competitively," he said. "They import Irish oysters for their national competition."

McMurray may have an edge: a steel blade married to a pistol grip custom molded out of epoxy to fit his right hand. It was just the ticket for the Mohegan Sun contest in Las Vegas three weeks ago, where McMurray took the top prize.

So what's he going to do with the \$3,500?

"Oh, I don't treat myself," he said. "It helps pay for the renovations and feed the kids." ■

## The Arsenal By Jill Santopietro



**R. W. Apple Jr.**, The New York Times's intrepid correspondent and gourmand, died in October. A prolific food writer, Apple was always willing to dispense dining tips and share sources with fellow reporters. In fact, the night before he died, he responded to my e-mail message asking where to find a great example of American pancakes: "Just very quickly," he wrote, "since I don't have my files here, a thought or two: 1) American pancakes — Overrated, as you say. You might try the Bongo Room, in Wicker Park, north of Chicago."

And so I did. The Bongo Room serves innovative, often seasonal pancakes, many of which sound too sweet on paper — s'more-banana flapjacks, for example — but are winning combinations. My favorite was a cornmeal-cranberry pancake with warm apple compote and caramel-butter sauce. It was earthy, tart, sweet and fluffy — a robust pancake, if you can imagine such a thing. As was often the case with food, Apple was right.

### Cornmeal-Cranberry Pancakes

For the compote:

- 2 gala apples
- 2 Granny Smith apples
- ½ cup packed light brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¾ teaspoon pumpkin-pie spice
- 2 cups apple cider
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch

For the caramel-butter sauce:

- 2 teaspoons cream cheese
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ½ tablespoon butter
- Salt

For the pancakes:

- 10 tablespoons butter, cut into chunks, plus more for greasing pan
- 2 cups milk
- 4 large eggs
- 2 cups flour
- ½ cup yellow cornmeal
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 1¼ cups chopped fresh cranberries
- Maple syrup, optional.

1. Make the compote: Peel, core, quarter and cut the apples into 1-inch pieces. Place the apples, sugar, salt, spice, cider and ½ cup water in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Lower the heat and simmer until the apples are soft and the juices thick, about 75 minutes. In a small bowl, dissolve the cornstarch in 2 teaspoons water. About 5 minutes before the compote is done, stir the cornstarch mixture into the apples. Keep warm.
2. Make the caramel-butter sauce: Place the cream cheese in a bowl and set aside. In a small saucepan, cook the sugar over medium-high heat to a dark caramel, swirling the pan as it begins to brown to distribute the sugar. Do not stir. Off the heat, carefully whisk in the cream and butter. Return to low heat, add a pinch of salt and simmer until the solids dissolve. Stir 3 teaspoons of caramel sauce into the cream cheese. Mix until the cream cheese dissolves, then whisk this mixture back into the caramel sauce. Keep warm.
3. Make the pancakes: In a saucepan over medium-low heat, heat the butter and milk until the butter melts. Set aside until lukewarm, about 15 minutes. Beat the eggs in a medium bowl. Slowly stir in ½ cup of the warm milk mixture (it cannot be hot, or it will cook the eggs). Pour in the remaining milk mixture and stir to combine.
4. In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, cornmeal, sugar, baking powder and salt. Pour the egg mixture into the flour mixture a little at a time, stirring slowly, just until the dry ingredients are well moistened. The batter should be lumpy and will start to bubble.
5. Heat a griddle or skillet over medium-high heat until a few drops of water sprinkled on it sizzle. Lightly grease the pan with butter, then add 3 to 4 tablespoons batter to make a 4-inch pancake. As soon as the batter sets, sprinkle the top with cranberries. Cook until bubbles break on the surface. Flip and cook for another 30 seconds, or until the bottom is lightly browned. Repeat, buttering the pan and adjusting the heat as needed. Serve topped with apple compote and lightly drizzled with caramel-butter sauce or maple syrup. *Makes about 24 4-inch pancakes. Toppings adapted from John Latino at the Bongo Room. Pancakes adapted from "The Breakfast Book," by Marion Cunningham.*