

Anaheim chefs impress at historic James Beard House

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Chef Michael Rossi has harvested grapes in France, toured truffle farms in Italy and trained under two Michelin-honored chefs in Europe.

But those culinary milestones don't compare to the evening he recently spent cooking at the historic James Beard House.

Rossi, executive chef at The Ranch in Anaheim, joined other top American chefs inside the tiny New York kitchen that once belonged to culinary icon Beard. Making the night even more sentimental, Rossi cooked alongside his longtime mentor, Andrew Sutton, executive chef at Napa Rose in Anaheim, and his brother, David, pastry chef at The

Ranch.

"It was an incredible honor," said Michael Rossi, an Orange County native. "For a chef, there's probably no cooler thing to be able to do than cook inside the James Beard House. It was a highlight of my career."

Throughout the year, the James Beard House invites talented chefs to prepare multicourse meals with wine pairings for up to 74 guests. Diners – James Beard Foundation members or New York visitors – pay \$130 or \$170 for a seat.

Michael Rossi and Sutton were tapped to cook for a themed "Salmon Seduction" dinner, featuring "craft-raised" salmon from James Beard purveyor Skuna Bay. The company raises salmon off Vancouver Island.

The Ranch, known for its rustic farm-to-table American-style cuisine, is one of 800 restaurants and boutique retailers in 23 states that serve or sell Skuna Bay salmon.

"It's probably the best salmon in the world," Rossi said. "It comes out of the water and it is in our restaurant in three days."

The New York event also featured dishes from Randy Waidner of Gibsons restaurants in Chicago, and Angelo Sosa of "Top Chef" fame. The Ranch's master sommelier, Michael Jordan, and Napa Rose's Philippe Tosques paired wines with each course.

Sutton had cooked at the Beard house three previous times. But this event was special because it showcased the culinary flair coming from Orange County.

"To have Michael and David Rossi, two talents that have developed into great chefs, work right beside us at the Beard house — I am so very proud," Sutton said.

Each chef was tasked with creating one hors d'oeuvre and one entree dish.

The pressure was on.

"It's a big stage, and you're playing on a field with a bunch of well-known chefs," Michael Rossi said.

Sutton said every skill comes into play: menu writing, knife skills, pan skills.

And hosting skills.

During the evening, paying guests are invited into the kitchen to chat with the chefs. "You need to be clean, organized and ready to entertain," Sutton said.

With his meal, Michael Rossi said he wasn't going to take any risks. He tested dishes at The Ranch during Christmas using the same farm-fresh ingredients that have made the Anaheim restaurant one of the most talked-about in Orange County.

"We wanted to make something we'd make here in the restaurant," he said.

Trained in Italy, Michael Rossi went to his wheelhouse. He served a pan-roasted salmon with sweet potato gnocchi, golden chanterelle mushrooms, homemade barbecue bacon and celery-root chowder.

His appetizer was a country-fried Petaluma quail served with Weiser Farms potatoes, housemade agave mustard, warm barbecue bacon vinaigrette and arugula.

"I just like to cook really good food," said Michael Rossi, a graduate of California Culinary Academy in San Francisco.

David Rossi made popcorn macarons and a gourmet Milky Way-inspired treat. The latter, made with Valrhona chocolate, malted nougat and caramel ice cream, is available on The Ranch's dessert menu.

In New York, the brothers made an impression.

"We've been invited back this year, which is a tremendous honor," Michael Rossi said.

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