

Lifestyle | Features



Chefs compete in the 2023 Bocuse d'Or cooking competition at the SIRHA (Salon International de la Restauration, de l'Hotellerie et de l'Alimentation) in the Eurexpo exhibition hall in Chassieu, near Lyon, central-eastern France.



Danish chef Brian Mark Hansen (C) celebrates with his team on the podium after winning the 2023 Bocuse d'Or cooking competition at the SIRHA. —AFP photos

Denmark wins global culinary showdown



French chef Nais Pirollet competes in the 2023 Bocuse d'Or cooking competition.

Denmark's ode to the humble squash helped propel the Nordic nation to victory Monday in prestigious culinary competition the Bocuse d'or, beating host and defending champion France.

With foghorns and firecrackers, a passionate Danish crowd cheered on chef Brian Mark Hansen, 41, as he steered Denmark to its third victory in the gastronomy equivalent of the World Cup.

"These Danes are crazy, hey? That's the Vikings," said Hansen, a chef in a Michelin-starred restaurant in Copenhagen. "I have dreamed of this for 20 years."

After national selections in some 60 countries, the two-day final in Lyon pitted 24 chefs against each other in the competition set up by French "Nouvelle Cuisine" pioneer Paul Bocuse in 1983. Norway came second and Hungary third.

Long known for their hearty meat-and-potatoes fare, Danish chefs have taken the culinary world by storm in recent years, racking up Michelin stars and global awards.

Scandinavian contestants have finished at least in the top three every time in the biennial event going back to 1991. France has seven titles, but this year chef Nais Pirollet, 25, the only woman in the competition, finished fifth.

"There is no sadness, it is a victory to be here," she said.

Training for the competition is intense, "a bit like a fighter pilot or Formula 1 driver," said last year's winner Davy Tissot, president of the 2023 jury.

Finland's 25-year-old candidate Johan Kurkela has been known to train for 10 hours straight locked in a basement. Meanwhile, Pirollet trained daily for five-and-a-half hours nonstop to replicate competition conditions.

Simplicity

Denmark got the most jury votes in both categories. The first, "Feed the kids," aimed to highlight the importance of nutrition in children's diets, using the squash. From butternut to spaghetti squash, seeds and all, the chefs had to use their imagination to highlight the humble dish — a fruit often mistaken for a vegetable — resulting in an explosion of orange creations.



Danish chef Brian Mark Hansen (C-R) celebrates with his team on the podium after winning the 2023 Bocuse d'Or cooking competition with second and third placed teams.

Simplicity "is the hardest thing to do," said Tissot. "I want to taste the squash. I also wanted to be transported into a universe which I might not know," said three-star chef Dominique Crenn, honorary president of the grand final.

For the main dish, the chefs had to mesmerise with monkfish, pulling out all the stops when it came to presentation. Mauritian chef Kritesh Halkory — one of only two candidates from Africa — used a massive sea urchin shell as a gravy boat. —AFP



US supporters cheer for their team.



Chinese chef Nick Yuli Lin (C) competes in the 2023 Bocuse d'Or competition.



An Iraqi youth (R) buys freshly-baked loaves at a bakery for Samoon bread in Al-Rashid street, in Iraq's capital Baghdad. —AFP photos



A staff member mans the oven at a bakery for Samoon bread.

Iraqis chow down on diamond shaped 'samoon' bread

It is ubiquitous in Iraq—a diamond-shaped bread known as "samoon" which provides an inexpensive companion to almost any meal served up on tables across the country. Abu Sajjad, a bakery owner in central Baghdad, said he takes a fresh batch out of the oven every 45 seconds. The small, crunchy loaves can accompany dishes from meat to rice, and can be found on tables in even the most far-flung villages.

Some Iraqis like to eat them on the go after cracking them open and adding fillings like falafel and vegetables. Part of their popularity lies in their simplicity—and affordability. "I sell eight pieces of samoon for 1,000 dinars (\$0.70)," said 43-year-old Abu Sajjad, who has owned the bakery since 2005.

His son Sajjad, who is in his twenties, mixes flour, yeast and water, and sometimes a pinch of salt, then lets a machine knead the dough for 10 minutes. After letting it rest, he shapes lumps of dough into diamond-shaped loaves that leave his brick oven with a crunchy crust on the outside and steaming hot on the inside.

The bakery sells 10,000 samoon pieces "on a normal day",

while on Fridays, the Islamic day of rest, "we can go up to 12,000", Sajjad, the son, said. Their busy shop sits on Baghdad's Al-Rashid Street among dilapidated 19th century houses, while a host of restaurants make up their main customers.

Recent commodity price hikes have seen the cost of flour imported from Turkey increase. But Abu Sajjad said he had "lowered the weight of each samoon from 120 to 100 grammes" instead of raising prices. According to author Nawal Nasrallah, the name samoon came from a Turkish term whose roots derive from the Greek word for bread. While noting possible earlier versions of the loaves, she said "it seems that the diamond shape was developed by the early 20th century Iraqi bakers", writing in her cookbook and history of Iraqi cuisine, "Delights from the Garden of Eden".

With lunchtime fast approaching, Karim, a regular customer at the bakery, was among those stocking up. "We Iraqis love samoon. We were born with it, we are used to it—and we like it hot," the 41-year-old said while biting into a freshly baked loaf. —AFP

How three dust specks reveal an asteroid's secrets

The specks are tiny. No, really tiny. Smaller than the diameter of a hair. But they hold billions of years of history that reveal some of the secrets of asteroids. The three minute particles from an asteroid called Itokawa show some of these space rocks are vastly older than was thought, and are much tougher.

And that could mean we need bolder ways to prevent catastrophic collisions with Earth, according to research published Tuesday. The three samples were collected in 2005 from the peanut-shaped Itokawa, some 300 million kilometres (186 million miles) from Earth.

It took the Japanese spacecraft Hayabusa five years to return them to Earth, along with hundreds of other particles from Itokawa, and scientists have been analysing them for clues ever since. Fred Jourdan, professor at Curtin University's School of Earth and Planetary Sciences, wanted to see what the specks could reveal about the age of rubble-pile asteroids like Itokawa.

These form when solid asteroids collide and the resulting fragments assemble into new structures. Solid asteroids are thought to have a lifespan of several hundred million years, and are gradually ground down by constant collisions.

But rubble-pile asteroids have a very different structure, composed of rocks, dust, pebbles and a void, and held together by the gravitational pull of their various components. "It's like a giant space cushion, and cushions are good at absorbing shock," Jourdan said.

To find out just how good, the team analysed crystal structures in the samples, looking for deformations caused

by the impact that created Itokawa. And they dated the samples by measuring the decay of potassium into argon.

The methods suggest Itokawa was formed by an asteroid collision at least 4.2 billion years ago, ten times older than solid asteroids of similar size are predicted to be. "We were really surprised," said Jourdan. "I mean that's really, really old, and I'm sure some of my colleagues are not even going to believe it."

Rubble-pile asteroids are so resilient to the constant battering they face that they are likely to be much more abundant than previously assumed, the research published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences concludes.

That might mean we need new ways to tackle such asteroids on a collision course with Earth, Jourdan said. NASA's recent DART test showed asteroids like Itokawa can be nudged off course, but that would likely require a lead time of several years.

An asteroid just weeks from colliding with Earth would require a different approach, and Jourdan argues a nuclear blast might be needed. "It's not 'Armageddon'-style," blowing it up, he hastens to add, referring to the 1998 sci-fi movie.

"The shockwave should push the asteroid out of the way." It is a far-reaching conclusion to draw from such tiny specks of dust, but each particle is analysed at the atomic level. "We can get big stories like that out of (something) very, very small, because those machines, what they're doing, is the measuring and counting of atoms," Jourdan said. "Every grain has its own story to tell." —AFP