

FoodBites: Shake's win puts best-chowder debate to rest

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Sabu Shake is remembered for his big heart, big hat and big ideas. All three came into play decades ago in a defining moment for the gregarious, cowboy-hat-topped owner of Old Fisherman's Grotto, who decided to greet Wharf visitors with a smile and a free sample of his cream-style clam chowder that would one day help put his restaurant on the map — and help build a legacy for his six sons.

Since the restaurant opened in 1950, talk of the best chowder in Monterey always tilted toward the Grotto (in a modern twist, nearly all of the 357 online Yelp reviews ring praise on Shake's creamy concoction). The recipe is a closely guarded secret, known to only three or four living souls (including executive chef Juan Ponce). Sabu's son Chris, who has run the Grotto even before his father's death in 1998, won't even provide a complete list of ingredients.

"It's something very special in my family," he says.

Last weekend, at a blind tasting put on by the Monterey Wine Festival, six judges (myself among them) waded through 14 chowders, and overwhelmingly chose the Grotto for its creamy, perfectly balanced and spiced chowder dotted with large, plump, tender clams. The Shake entry was the overwhelming winner of the Copper Pot, what

organizers hope is perpetual trophy.

"I was very surprised, and excited," said Shake. "When it's a blind tasting, with multiple contestants, you just never know. We have a great reputation for our chowder, though. It's the same one we serve 365

days a year (at the Grotto and sister restaurant The Fish Hopper)."

The Grotto (and the Shake-owned Fish Hopper) also took home the people's choice award, this on the heels of claiming first place in the West Coast Chowder Competition a few years back. "That certainly ends the debate of who has the best chowder on the Wharf," said Shake.

According to Shake, what sets apart his family's chowder from the rest is the "Monterey style" that his father invented. "Other chowders are a little thinner, with big chunks. Ours is real creamy, like a bisque, and we use garlic."

Oops, he let one slip. He also revealed they use quahog clams, one of two clams they throw into the mix.

Tasting all the entries was a revelation that not all chowders are created equal. On a 15-point grading scale, I graded Shake's a 12.5 (my high score), and scores went all the way down to a 3. The poor chowders were universally oversalted, and probably all began with a clam base, an MSG-laden shortcut that many restaurants take. Some clams were tough and chewy, and others were gritty with sand particles. I suffered through fatty bacon pieces, chalky roux balls and bell peppers (to me, an abomination in clam chowder).

Second place at Saturday's blind tasting went to Chef Jeff Lindscomb of Cafe Fina and third place went to Chef Pedro Barroso of Louie Linguini on Cannery Row.

While the Skakes won't reveal the exact method to their father's chowder madness, Tene Shake (Isabella's, Lattitudes) provides fans of his "Coastal Cuisine" television cooking show with the following recipe:

Coastal Cuisine Clam Chowder (Serves 8)

4 qts. littleneck clams (about 1 2/3 cups cooked and chopped)
1 clove garlic, chopped
1 cup water
2 oz. salt pork, finely chopped
2 cups chopped onions
3 T. flour
1½ lbs. potatoes, peeled and diced into ½-inch cubes
4½ cups clam broth
3 cups fish stock
2 cups light cream
Oyster crackers (optional)

Steps: Clean the clams and place them in a large pot along with the garlic and water. Steam the clams just until opened, about 6 to 10 minutes, depending upon their size. Drain and shell the clams, reserving the broth. Mince the clam flesh and set aside. Filter the clam broth either through coffee filters or cheesecloth and set aside.

In a large, heavy pot slowly render the salt pork. Remove the cracklings and set them aside. Slowly cook the onions in the fat for about 6 minutes, stirring frequently, or until cooked through but not browned. Stir in the flour and cook, stirring, for 3

minutes. Add the reserved clam broth and fish stock, and whisk to remove any flour lumps.

Bring the liquid to boil, add the potatoes, lower the heat, and simmer until the potatoes are cooked through, about 15 minutes. Stir in the reserved clams, salt-pork cracklings, and light cream. Heat the chowder until it is the temperature you prefer. Serve in large soup bowls with oyster crackers on the side.

Cheers for AIWF

The American Institute of Wine Food's mission is to "provide a forum for the study and enjoyment of gastronomy." The nonprofit, founded in 1981 by Julia Child, Robert Mondavi and others, provides thousands of members across the country the opportunity to eat, drink and laugh with like-minded souls.

The Monterey Bay chapter is one of 27 nationwide that cater to 4,000-plus members. Last week's dinner-and-a-movie event at the Outdoor Forest Theater in Carmel was a perfect example of how these enthusiasts come together with creativity and enthusiasm. Before we all watched "Bottle Shock," the 2008 movie centered around the 1976 "Judgment of Paris" and the unexpected victories by California wines in a blind tasting against the best from France, the local AIWF put forth an extraordinary buffet. And the conversations with Chalone winemaker Robert Cook (Chalone, near Soledad, placed third among Chardonnays) were fascinating.

Membership to the AIWF is open to all. It is a wonderful way to meet knowledgeable people in the industry and meet others with common interests. Check out www.aiwf.org. The next big event is Saturday, Sept. 11, as AIWF holds its "Celebration of Life" gala dinner at The Beach Club at Pebble Beach.