

In terms of taste, Jacksonville is ahead of the game

All the Super Bowl hubbub has left this town thinking it has finally made it. When 2005 rolls around, the rest of the state will have to take us seriously.

We're hosting a Super Bowl; they'll have to admit we are in the big leagues then, right?

There's no need to wait until 2005. That admission came from all places — The Orlando Sentinel (the same newspaper

that made Lynyrd Skynyrd jokes when Jacksonville got the 2005 spectacular).

Sentinel restaurant critic Scott Joseph was rather impressed with Orange Park native and chef at Bistro Aix Tom Gray when he was featured at the opening night of the Epcot Food and Wine Festival's Grand Tasting.

The Grand Tasting is one of several dining events during the three-week festival. Diners pay \$60 (plus park admis-

sion) to sample food from several chefs and wines from about a dozen vineyards. To get invited to the opening night gig was quite an honor, but to steal the show, that was something else. Especially when you consider that Gray's food was competing for attention with that of "celebrity chefs" Bobby Flay (of Mesa Grill in New York), Rick Bayless (of Fronterra Grill in Chicago) and Francois Payard (of Payard Patisserie in New

York).

Joseph wrote in his Oct. 27 Chow Hound column: "But it was Tom Gray of Bistro Aix in Jacksonville [!](sic) who blew everyone away with his pan-seared halibut with celeriac puree and sauce barigoule, a broth made with artichoke, fish stock, white wine and sweet carrots. It's wonderful, and it did make me want

See MACDONALD, Page F-3

Macdonald: Jacksonville chef a hit at Grand Tasting in Orlando

to hop on I-4 and steer the Houndmobile to Jacksonville and check out the rest of the menu."

Contacted by phone, Joseph expounded, saying that Gray was a hit because he went out of his way to do it right.

"It was the flavors, something about them blended together perfectly. At an event like this one, you move around quickly, take a bite of this, finish it or put it down. There was something about his that made you want to stop for a second, savor the flavor and enjoy it all."

Joseph also had opinions about the "celebrity chefs."

"Guys that yell 'Bam!' when they throw seasonings into a pot, doesn't mean that they can cook. Flay and Bayless had some pretty boring food that night. I can't tell you anything about it."

Gray told me that the favorable press is just a bonus. Being invited as the only First Coast representative was an honor in itself.

"Going into it, we were definitely nervous just because of the size of the event, and it was such a publicized event. I was a little nervous. But once we were under way, doing what we do — cooking — it was fine. Then when you hear all the comments, that made me feel great. I was ecstatic. It makes you feel good about what you are doing. You know you are heading in the right direction."

Gray chose Oak-Fired Fish (Aixoise) (as it is listed on his menu) because it offered interesting food and wine pairings.

"Artichokes with wine is a difficult pairing," Gray said. He suggested serving it with a Pinot Blanc, light Chardonnay or Viognier. "They [artichokes] usually give a metallic flavor to the wine. By using sweet carrots, it offsets it and it goes well with the wine. It's a signature item for us here."

To enjoy the halibut, you'll have to move quickly; it will probably be off the menu by Wednesday. After that, the dish will be made with either mahi-mahi, cobia or even scallops.

Preparing more than 300 servings isn't a one-day undertaking. Gray and his staff began cutting ingredients on the Thursday before the Oct. 21 event and prepared the 60-quarts of sauce at the restaurant. Gray and his assistant, Aix Catering Chef Clancy Heicher, arrived at Epcot the morning of Oct. 20 and then did the rest of the prep work. The night of the event, the two busily cooked the halibut and individually plated each serving for the hordes waiting in line.

"We used butane burners and had three pans going, rotating

them," Gray explained. "It was such a hit that we had a line for two hours solid. Some people came through two or three times. We didn't get to see much of the event."

The only minor mishap from taking the Aix show on the road was that Gray forgot his chef's coat. Epcot had one for him the night of the event, but he had to borrow one of Heicher's for all the prep work. It may not sound like a big deal, but a chef without his coat would feel as strange as a baseball player taking the field without his cap.

But all in all, the event proves to Gray, and to me, that Jacksonville is being taken seriously as a first-class Florida city.

"I think it is proving that Jacksonville dining is growing and evolving quickly," Gray said. "People are beginning to accept and welcome this style of restaurant — a privately owned restaurant that has a trained chef and a team that really cares. It is very different from the corporate world restaurants that Jacksonville is inundated with."

With this kind of success, don't be surprised if the St. Johns River isn't the only thing flowing north. I can see traffic on I-95 coming from the Orlando area getting a bit more congested well before Super Bowl Sunday 2005.