

Fifth annual Tasting Event highlights city's best eateries

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The Village Voice's Fifth Annual Tasting Event took place this past Tuesday, March 13, at the 69th Regiment Armory building across from the Baruch Vertical Campus. People came from all boroughs of New York City, to arrive early and wait in anticipation for the evening's massive, upcoming food attractions.

At 6 p.m., the huge doors were opened and gave way to the crowds of guests, rushing to the main food hall where endless booths and restaurant staff awaited to greet them. A food array of epic proportions greeted each guest on the way inside; at each booth there was a personalized banner, representing their prized creation and dish of the night. Almost immediately, there were people hovering round each row – among them chefs in their element, assembling in-house specialties.

The first stop of the evening was the fresh mozzarella and chai sticky buns, innovatively produced by the Scratchbread Bakery. It was this plate with delicious facets that provided the perfect momentum for the evening's chow-down fest. The next destination was Mama's food shop, home to some of the beloved comfort food that is continuously prepared and served at dress-down prices. For these talented chefs, the night's plate of choice was the diversified, roasted pork shoulder, which could be found on the good, salted yet hearty side of the culinary spectrum.

Dirt Candy shop featured a fun and eclectic offering at their booth, with their Tomato and Chipotle cotton candy, which was spun right on the spot and served with sweet and spicy notes in a standard cone. This was a unique treat, despite the uncommon savory combination instead of the timeless, syrupy sweet flavor. Likewise, one item that absolutely could not be missed was the ingenious, yet accidental creation served by Ditch Plains Restaurant and Chef March Murphy - their mac n' cheese-covered hot dog blew the guests away! It was everything to look for in all comfort food components.

The salty sweet flavor spectrum took the spotlight in the dessert selections served throughout the evening. What's not to love about salted caramel?

This thought came to mind while standing among crowds of eager attendees on line. They were waiting to taste one of the most popular desserts of the night, dished out by Ample Hills Creamery, hailing from Brooklyn, NY. The oval cups of dairy cargo were a sight created for the highest degree of sweet tooth fans. Their miniature bowl of decadent, salted crack caramel, made with salted butter caramel ice cream and rich morsels of original-style "crack cookies," are created with the aid of saline crackers, tons of butter sugar and chocolate – and caramelized in the oven.

This dazzling ice cream, served chilled and creamy, was given an award by the Village Voice for the best use of the word "crack" in a dessert. Savory and sweet dishes made the night a dream-worthy vacation, the perfect getaway for exploring new and extraordinary culinary creations. Examples included the Chicken Marsala meatballs paired with spring onions, hastily offered by the vigorous staff of The Meatball Shop.

"It's so hard to choose just one favorite, since there are so many unique and tasty treats at the event." Said Lauren Shockey, author, chef and restaurant critic at the Village Voice. "But I loved the adobo taco from Umi Nom for its unique mix of cultures, the goat face sandwich from Goat Town for its meaty decadence, the liang pi noodles at Xi'an Famous Foods for its spicy goodness, the fried Brussels sprouts from Tanoreen because I'm a sucker for Brussels sprouts, and the salted caramel crack ice cream from Ample Hills Creamery because that was just an awesome flavor! And I could go on!"

Insanely good desserts were passed out by Robicelli's Bakery owner Matt Robicelli, who prepared three kinds for the crowd. First, I sampled the lemon semolina cake with pine tree honey buttercream topped with roasted pignolis. The pine tree honey butter would transform an average bowl of oatmeal; it would make for a gorgeous breakfast cake to eat every morning.

It was also impossible to go wrong with their Chambord brownies and dark chocolate Dulce Whoopie Pies, which were completely rich and extravagant.

A cheerful nod must go to Donut Plant bakery, for always proving that anytime is a good time to indulge in their gleaming, mini donuts, which were overflowing with peanut butter and blackberry filling.

The Choice Eats event made it easy to feel like Christmas came early for food-lovers this year. Luckily, this writer was able to experience the best opportunity – to have received an award-worthy plate of toasted smores, made on the spot with artisanally-blow-torched marshmallows created by the talented chefs at Smore's Bakery. I walked happily to the 6 train, metro card in one hand, caramelized sugar treat in the other. What a night!