

Best Bites from 2015's South Beach Wine & Food Festival

From cannoli ice cream to braised lamb, these plates were worth the indulgence

The Cooking Channel and Food Network's South Beach Wine & Food Festival returns to **Miami Beach** each year in mid-February, welcoming four days of food-focused events and libation-fueled jubilee.

This year's itinerary debuted a new Italian-themed kickoff party, as well as a refurbished "The Q"; it even sprouted branching parties and sitdowns across town. The festival's signature marquees also upped their game, luring hundreds of chefs from coast to coast to Miami Beach's shores.

With such a gastronomic influx, South Beach Wine & Food Festival once again solidified itself as the gateway to the national food scene, serving as the perfect opportunity to sample bites from the country's top restaurants. The 10Best team combed through the jam-packed lineup to find the weekend's best dishes, noting creativity, presentation and flavor.

1. Chocolate "Twinkie" with Peanut Butter and Jelly Filling

By Chez Bon Bon at the Fontainebleau in Miami Beach, Fla.

At first glance, this finger-like bite did not look promising in comparison to its colorful counterparts on the Best of the Best's decadent dessert table. However, its simplistic and almost unattractive appearance is what piqued our interest. It sat there anonymously, forcing us to inquire about its make-up.



Chocolate "Twinkie" with peanut butter and jelly filling

This moist chocolate cake oozed with a creamy peanut butter and jelly filling; the bite beckoned childlike nostalgia, as though we were suddenly 10 years old again and sneaking in a forbidden midnight snack.

2. Cucumber and Basil Gimlet Sorbet, Manila Mango and Passion Fruit Caviar

By Yigit Pura at Tout Sweet Patisserie in San Francisco, Calif.

Best of the Best describes itself as "South Beach Wine & Food Festival's premier event," inviting the country's "50 best chefs" southbound to showcase their skills alongside esteemed wineries. The concept is an easy sell, but with so many contrasting flavor notes hitting the palate in one night, are we really getting an accurate sense of each plate's intention?



Cucumber and basil gimlet sorbet
Photo courtesy of Anthony Jordon

Enter Yigit Pura's fantastically refreshing concoction: a cucumber and basil gimlet sorbet with Manila mango and passion fruit caviar. Whether he meant to or not, this richly wonderful dessert acted as a perfect palate cleanser, enlivening the taste buds with its light but delicate playfulness. Each ingredient managed to come forth, balancing together in sweet synchrony.

3. Prawn Carpaccio with Margarita Spheres and Habanero Sauce

By Craig Strong at Studio at Montage in Laguna Beach, Calif.

Best of the Best flaunted plenty of carpaccio, but Craig Strong's perfectly thin and even more perfectly paired prawn carpaccio stood out above the rest.

4. Cannoli Ice Cream

By Three2Oh in Orlando, Fla.

Last year, Three2Oh took home the award for best dessert at the Munchies, thanks to their strawberry balsamic and cracked black pepper ice cream recipe.

This year, the Orlando-based creamery took their nitrogen frozen sweets to another level, introducing Italian Al Fresco Fest party-goers to their cannoli ice cream. The chilled filling was served alongside a crunchy shell and pistachios.



Cannoli ice cream
Photo courtesy of Anthony Jordon

5. Braised Lamb Tostada with Guajillo Chile, Queso Fresco and Guacamole

By Marc Meyer at Cookshop in New York, N.Y.

The fried tostada and tender lamb were the perfect pairing, adding crunch and texture to the more squashy ingredients.



6. Foie Gras Royale with Leek Foam and Black Truffles

By Gregory Pugin at Palme d'Or at The Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables, Fla. Pugin's charmingly presented foie gras royale moved like savory molasses across the mouth, elevated by a sprinkle of truffles and raw leeks.



7. Fried Chicken and Cheddar Waffle

By Robert Irvine and Jamie DeRosa at Tongue & Cheek in Miami Beach, Fla.

An astoundingly moist chicken anchored this classed dish, which topped an airy waffle alongside maple syrup and a mini Sriracha bottle.



Chicken and waffles

8. Smoked Trout and Dungeness Crab Salad with Apples and Brandy

By Jimmy Bradley at The Red Cat in New York, N.Y.

Bradley's take on the afternoon salad stole the afternoon, layering flavor and maintaining a light but moist consistency. The apple provided an unexpected crispness, freshening up the smokey undertones.

9. Modern Ricotta and Semolina Gnocchi

By Jonathon Sawyer at Trentina in Cleveland, Ohio

Sawyer's melty dumpling is a pasta-lover's dream, a creamy delight with a smidgen of saltiness. The artichoke and freshly shaved Parmesan exemplified precision and care.

10. Strawberry Kale Caesar Salad

By Julie Frans at Essensia Restaurant at The Palms Hotel in Miami Beach, Fla.

Sometimes the simplest dishes are the most memorable, and Frans' kale salad was an addictive relief to the weekend's heavy eating. The sweet, tart and plump strawberries broke through the kale's bitterness, joined by a light, oil-based version of the traditionally heavy dressing.