

A day with Scotland's street food stars

◆ The Scottish Street Food Awards saw 11 businesses competing to impress the judges, which included The Scotsman's Gaby Soutar. Our restaurant critic reflects on a day of fabulous food and difficult decisions

I really shouldn't have had breakfast. It's noon, and it turns out that none of the other judges of this year's Scottish Street Food Awards, has eaten today. I'm at Edinburgh's Neighbourhood Market with comic, writer and producer Jay Lafferty – "I'm the Gregg Wallace character," she says. There's also Conor Toomey, the head chef of Edinburgh's Michelin-starred restaurant, Condita, and Richard Johnson, founder of the British Street Food Awards, which launched in 2009. His company, Food Mutiny, is also responsible for the European and USA versions of this competition. Johnson gives us each an official-looking clipboard, and reveals that there will be 11 contestants today, each of whom will serve us two dishes. The winner will go on to the London finals from August 18-20. They'll also appear on C4's Sunday Brunch on August 13. No pressure, but last year's Scottish finalist ended up with the ultimate accolade. "The champion went on to win the British Street Food Awards, and the European Street Food Awards in Munich. He's now opened Junk in Newington and is setting the Edinburgh restaurant scene on fire," says Johnson. Our marathon feasting session will run

from noon until about 3pm, then we'll get a brief nil-by-mouth break, before returning for the presentation. Damn my morning muesli. I get a look at the line-up, and I'm only familiar with the Edinburgh-based businesses. These include Sando, who were set up during lockdown by hairdresser Gerald Warrack to offer Japanese-style shokupan sandwiches. There's also pizza truck Wanderers Kneaded, where I'm a regular, and The Funnel Cake Co, who are owned by The Little Chartroom prep chef, Danielle Sullivan. I'm already looking forward to dessert. We're starting with Black Pearl Creole Kitchen, who hail from Gairloch and serve from the side of a horsebox. Their puffy bara doubles are topped with a chana chickpea curry, and I want to immediately snarf the lot. Must pace myself. It's an amazingly high standard of a start. Next contestant, The Falafel Stop, makes me reassess my stance on this foodstuff. Often, these are like gerbil bedding, but owner Dany Hokayem's creations are beautifully light and crispy, with a squishy centre that's made from fava beans. It seems that all falafels are not the same. The next couple of hours pass in a blur of al-fresco banqueting. We eat



Vietnamese spring rolls from Okanda, which is the new pan-Asian business from Suki Jayaratne and Shehan Fernando, who already own Edinburgh's Bonnie & Wild resident Kochchi. There are also huge portions of fried chicken and waffles by Delightfully Delicious. If I had a hangover, this is what I would spend my money on. So many of the ventures are run by couples. I start to wonder if my husband and I could get one of these going. He could cook, I'd deal with the cash. Everyone presents their dishes with enthusiasm and passion. It makes me go a bit teary at one point. Johnson, who is at the helm of the five heats, with the next stop Cardiff, is very impressed by this year's standard. There's usually a few 'meh' contestants, but not this time. We're struggling to edit our list. However, once we've tried the wares from Bia, which is owned by couple Jordan Cochrane and Amanda Hamilton, there's a consensus that they should definitely be up there. "We started the business in February because we wanted to work with each other, doing what we love and showcasing the fantastic produce in Scotland and Ireland," says Hamilton. Their cock-a-leekie arancini balls, with centres of melted Isle of Mull cheddar, are just so good, as are the Irish boxty pancakes and slow-cooked lamb shoulder with pickled fennel. "It's fusion food, though we don't love that word," says Hamilton. This is hugely satisfying, on a typical Scottish July day, while we're all shivering on our picnic bench and trying to stop takeaway packaging from blowing off the table. Another stand-out is Kirkcaldy-based Choola. They serve Nepalese food and were founded by husband-and-wife duo

Kirkcaldy-based Choola, main, specialises in food from Nepal; above from left: Jordan Cochrane and Amanda Hamilton of Bia, Nicole Limbu of Choola, Hamish Rowe of Fred's Backyard Barbecue and Ameer Limbu of Choola were all put forward to the British finals; chicken and waffles from Delightfully Delicious, below

Ameer and Nicole Limbu. Ameer grew up in Nepal and was taught to cook by his mum and aunts. We try their momo dumplings filled with Balcaskie Farm pork, and a fantastic buffalo curry, with meat that was sourced from The Buffalo Farm in Fife. It's served with crispy beaten rice and radish pickle. "I think we're going to have more than one winner," says Johnson, as he chomps another mouthful. We also take delivery of brisket bun from Hamish Rowe's business Fred's Backyard Barbecue, which is named after his grandfather. It's another lockdown start-up, and the owner taught himself this Texan style of cooking, using YouTube videos, and made his own smoker called Mavis. She's set up behind his stall, alongside a pile of white oak logs. We can't choose between this trio, so we greedily go for them all. "It seemed only right that the best heat we've had in years of running street food competitions across Europe should have more than one winner going to the London finals," says Johnson. As Rowe, who started out at Leith Market, says: "I'm lost for words. I started cooking barbecue in my back garden for fun and never thought in a million years it would lead here. The standard was so high, which makes it all the more rewarding. I wish my grandad could be here to see this. He'd tell me I was dreaming." Along with Wanderers Kneaded, who bagged the People's Choice award, Bia, Fred's Backyard Barbecue and Choola are all off to the big event at Hackney Bridge, then, maybe, the European Street Food Awards in Germany. Meanwhile, I need some time to digest. www.britishstreetfood.co.uk



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