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REAL CALIFORNIA MILK AWARDS CHEFS MICHAEL VAKNEEN AND EDDIE STALEWSKI WIN TOP PRIZES FOR INNOVATIVE USE OF REAL CALIFORNIA CHEESES AT 6TH REAL CALIFORNIA PIZZA CONTEST

Chefs Bring Home \$7,500 each in Protein and Produce Categories; Vakneen and Chef Jay Falk Win Three-Cheese Team Competition During Bake-off Event in Napa, Calif.

Napa, Calif. (August 7, 2024) – Following a live bake-off competition where eight professional chefs from across the United States were judged on their innovative pizzas highlighting California cow’s milk cheeses, the California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB) crowned three new pizza champions in the 2024 Real California Pizza Contest, the premier national search for the best pizza recipes that feature Real California Cheeses.

In the protein-focused category, Eddie Stalewski, chef of Mercurio’s in Pittsburgh, Pa., grabbed the contest’s \$7,500 prize for his Rose Bowl pizza.

The Rose Bowl pizza kicks off with crunchy, cheesy Frico edges on a thin, tavern-style cornmeal crust. It’s topped with mild Giardiniera vegetables, handmade Calabrian sausage, and pepperoni roses. The cheeses include Real California Fresh Mozzarella, Provolone, White Cheddar and Dry Jack. The pizza is finished with a sprinkle of pickled Juanita peppers and a basil pesto drizzle.

In the produce-focused category, Michael Vakneen, partner at Truly Pizza in Dana Point, Calif., earned a \$7,500 prize for his Umami Mushroom pizza.

The Umami Mushroom pizza is a deeply flavored creation with Real California Smoked Mozzarella, Stracchino, and TomaRashi cheeses combined with marinated roasted mushrooms – all topped with a creamy onion and garlic sauce. Touches of toasted sesame oil, sesame seeds, chopped green onion and bonito flakes complete the taste profile.

In a special team three-cheese pizza bake off, Vakneen and Jay Falk, chef at Caliente Pizza & Draft House in Pittsburgh, Pa., joined up to win the top prize. The pair shared the contest's \$7,500 prize.

The five other professional chef competitors each received \$750 for reaching the bake-off competition finals.

"Chefs thrive on innovation and we saw that with our winning chefs and recipes this year. We were pleased to see the variety of Real California cheese and dairy products they tapped into for inspiration," said Mike Gallagher, Business and Market Development Consultant for the CMAB. "All the recipes at the bake-off gave the finalists an opportunity to show the judges how products made with milk from California dairy families improve the quality and flavor profile of any pizza."

The 6th Real California Pizza Contest, held at the Culinary Institute of America at Copia in Napa, Calif., was open to professional chefs and culinary students across the United States. The 2024 contest again produced a record number of entries leading to a competitive finalist selection and exciting live event for participants.

The competition was judged by a renowned panel of judges including 13-time World Pizza Champion and owner of 22 culinary concepts, Tony Gemignani; certified pizzaiolo and award-winning executive chef Glenn Cybulski; and professional chef and 2023 Real California Pizza Contest Grand Prize Winner Bill Crawford. Judges based scores on a range of factors including taste, texture and the inventive use of cheeses made with Real California Milk.

"California's position as the country's number one producer of milk and Mozzarella is a testament to the hard work of the state's dairy farm families and processors," said John Talbot, CEO of the CMAB. "Whether in pizza or any other menu item, chefs know they can depend on the quality, sustainability and flavor of more than 250 cheeses being made in California."

The 2024 Real California Pizza Contest finalists and winners:

Protein

- CATEGORY WINNER: Eddie Stalewski, Mecurio's, Pittsburgh, Pa.
- Jose Valverde, Zorba's Pizza, Millbrae, Calif.
- Leith Leiser-Miller, Psychic Pie, Sebastopol, Calif.
- Jay Falk, Caliente Pizza & Draft House, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Produce

- CATEGORY WINNER: Michael Vakneen, Truly Pizza, Dana Point, Calif.
- Doug Dellaccio, Wayfarer Bread, La Jolla, Calif.
- Constantino Anezinos, Zorba's Pizza, Millbrae, Calif.
- Ray Cullison, Charlie's Pizzeria, Kingman, Ariz.

Three Cheese Team

- WINNERS: Jay Falk, Caliente Pizza & Draft House, Pittsburgh, Pa. and Michael Vakneen, Truly Pizza, Dana Point, Calif.

Details on the bake-off event, chef finalists and the CMAB are available on the [Real California Pizza Contest website](#). An online recipe book with all 8 finalist pizzas and the team three-cheese pizza, as well as exclusive videos from the contest, will be released online in September.

California is a reliable, consistent source of sustainable dairy products used by chefs throughout the world. As the nation's largest dairy state, California boasts an impressive lineup of award-winning cheesemakers and dairy processors, that help drive dining innovation nationwide.

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About Real California Milk/the California Milk Advisory Board

The California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB), an instrumentality of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, is funded by the state's dairy farm families who lead the nation in sustainable dairy farming practices. With a vision to nourish the world with the wholesome goodness of Real California Milk, the CMAB's programs focus on increasing demand for California dairy products in the state, across the U.S. and around the world through advertising, public relations, research, and retail and foodservice promotional programs.

The Foodservice Division of the CMAB supports foodservice operators and distributors that use Real California dairy products. The CMAB offers marketing and promotional support for foodservice operators that purchase dairy products with the Real California Milk seal, which means they are made with milk from California's family dairy farms, using some of the most sustainable dairy practices in the nation.

For more information on sourcing cheese from California, contact the foodservice team at 209.883.6455 (MILK), businessdevelopment@cmab.net or RealCaliforniaMilk.com/Foodservice, [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [YouTube](#).

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