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There's plenty at stake in The Official Great Aussie Pie Contest

• Fiona Donnelly



Hot stuff: Baker Ben Rosenthal from last year's overall winner, St George's Bakehouse in Adelaide. Picture: Jo-Anna Robinson Source: The Advertiser

AS chief judge of The Official Great Aussie Pie Competition, Mike French has lifted the lid on a few crackers over the past eight years.

One of the weirdest combos he's sampled was a gourmet entry teaming camel with plum sauce, but crocodile and camembert also sticks in his memory.



Old favourite: There are many exotic variations on the Aussie pie, but it's hard to go past a perfectly cooked steak pie with sauce. Picture: Newslifemedia Source: Supplied

"The variety is incredible. Some of them are very exotic." Mr French said. "The days when you could put onion in a meat pie and call it gourmet are long gone. "

Now in its 23rd year, pie judging takes place over four days in Melbourne from September 10-13 at the Fine Food Australia show.

Sixteen judges survey 1500 plus pies, assessing them for 20 different criteria.

This weekend, bakers around Australia from rural Western Australia to far northern Queensland will be building up a sweat, crafting and dispatching their finest to Victoria's capital.

The stakes are high.

Baker Ben Rosenthal from last year's overall winner, St George's Bakehouse, Adelaide said demand for the bakery's winning chunky steak pie was so intense after the win he didn't leave the bakery for two days and ended up sleeping overnight.

"It was non-stop," he said. "We easily quadrupled sales of our chunky beef pies," Mr Rosenthal said.

Entries to the competition are up 40 percent on 2011, with a gluten free category featuring for the first time and a bakery locator app available for smart phone users.

The fastest growing competition category is for gourmet pies – which includes everything from seafood to game such as buffalo and curry.

The team at St George's Bakehouse have spent the past two months fine tuning their gong-claiming chunky beef pie.

"This year we're trying to go back to back. I reckon we'll go top again with the chunky pie and our chicken curry with broccoli is another we could get up with," Mr Rosenthal said.

He puts the bakery's success in 2011 down to top quality ingredients and slow-cooking of the topside filling. "The chunky takes two to three hours to slow cook until the meat is tender and falls apart."

Mr Rosenthal plans to drive the 900km to Melbourne on Sunday night to deliver his pies personally on Monday morning.

The judges will be looking for well put-together pies with quality ingredients and "no boil-outs or split sides". Mr French said.

They will also be wielding the paddle pop stick of terror which they use to check for telltale gristle and tubing, sure signs of offal being added to the mix. Up to three pieces of gristle are allowed but pies lose points for this.