



Tasty little morsels

William Sitwell describes the highlights of this year's COUNTRY LIFE/Plain English Canapé Awards, in association with Mountfield Winery

Photographs by Andrew Sydenham

THESE are only a few things that motivate me to plough through a crowd, unashamedly scattering women and children in my wake. One is the prospect of missing a flight. Another is the sight of a good canapé. There are those at parties whose gaze rudely wanders from the individual in front of them because they hanker for more important company, but the reason for my occasionally darting eyes is simply that I'm awaiting the arrival of the next morsel.

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Of course, mindful of the importance of manners, if you do find yourself with the bride's mother or the boss's wife, the thing to do is to manoeuvre yourselves, deftly, to where the staff are piling in with their loaded trays. Check out where the catering tent or kitchen is located, then inform those you are conversing with that, say, it's less noisy over there... In this way, you can ensure ready access to the eats. ➤

Top: The winning Heritage carrot and crab parcel by Jackson Gilmore. **Above left:** Second place went to Doggart & Squash's whipped ricotta and crispy coppa. **Above right:** Third was the Norfolk game terrine by the English Canape Company. **Right:** The judges with the tough task of tasting them all





Top row, from left to right: **Wild mushroom brioche tartlets from Sarah Hall Catering; Peapod & Co's The Crab in Orbit; salmon teriyaki sashimi by Quail London; foral mouli cannelloni from Party Ingredients; and Hen Party by Chilli Bees.** *Bottom row:* **Oisín Quacker by Clean Slate Catering; proper taramasalata and fish skin by Tophat; Caiger and Co Catering's keralan spiced lentil doughnuts; Caper & Berry's lobster thermidor choux bun; and mangazilla pork by The Hill Food Company.** *Right:* **Judges enjoyed Classic Cuvée from Mountfield Winery (www.mountfieldwinery.com)**



This is all futile if the food fails. For canapés are a minefield. They provide a microcosm of all that can be great or terrible in the food world. In planning a canapé, the world is the chef's oyster, if not an actual oyster. He or she can take inspiration from every food culture across the planet. They can create little taste sensations, gleaming little treasures on a tray. They can be deftly, gloriously, complicated or wonderfully simple—although a great chef should certainly contemplate a fragrant Thai dish of chicken and basil on a rice crisp, they should never dismiss the comforting pleasures of a simple, well-made sausage.

With so much at stake, I was delighted to join the brilliant private chef Marianne Lumb to help judge this year's COUNTRY LIFE

Canapé of the Year Awards. In the calm, beautifully designed surroundings of kitchen-furniture brand Plain English, we sat alongside Editor Mark Hedges, Executive Editor Giles Kime and Tony Niblock, co-founder of Plain English.

This year's competition saw a shortlist of 18 entries, the highest number so far in the history of the contest. Some of the country's biggest names in catering were throwing their hats into the ring, indicative of how importantly people in the culinary world now take the subject of finger food. Reputations can be made. And so we judged: we looked, we savoured and we pondered on this year's extraordinary creations.

Among the competitors were Keralan spiced lentil doughnuts, wild mushroom brioche tartlets and Norfolk game terrine.



Some of the offerings had names more evocative of a Michelin-star-tilting fine-dining restaurant than a catering tent at a country wedding. There was the floral mouli cannelloni with nasturtium mousseline and pickled beetroot pearls, for example, the salmon teriyaki sashimi with bergamot, lime caviar, ginger and sesame and the lobster thermidor choux bun. One candidate had a mysterious label, The Crab in Orbit, and another was called Hen Party.

But no one cares what a canapé is called at a party. Menus aren't considered. The conventional rules of a restaurant go out of the window when it comes to canapés. Instead, it's how they look and taste that's more important. Presentation is key, too. A pretty tray that complements the food and entices the guest can help, but there are

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limits. I feel for waiting staff who are forced to heave around large chopping boards that bear mini burgers. There's service and there's weight training.

I feared for any staff who might have been expected to carry one of the entries, which, although definitely original, was vast. A huge piece of bark was decorated to look like a small forest; at the centre was a tree, around which was a small woodland of moss, sprouting funghi, other foliage and

small pieces of dried fauna, flora and fruit. The actual canapés were presented on little stools and were a combination of dried nettle moss, lentil sprouts, micro mushrooms and toasted yeast dressing, together with cocoa and coffee bean soil.

The winner and runners up were altogether simpler in style and execution. Soaring into first place was a decorative little parcel of heritage carrot and crab. It was fresh, tasty and elegant with a perfect balance of flavours. A nimble and original winner, it was created by Jackson Gilmour, a London-based company, the mantra of which is simply to provide for 'people who love food'. Second prize went to Doggart & Squash for its whipped ricotta and crispy coppa: a delicious, naughty, thin piece of cured pork with fluffy ricotta, drizzled ▶



Clockwise from top left: **The Edge of the Woods** from Pure Indulgence Catering; **Cheese and Biscuits** by the Blue Strawberry Group; **Rhubarb's Salt of the Earth**; **Alison Price's Autumnal Morsel**

with a little honey and sitting on brioche with a hint of truffle. Perfectly executed, it was a taste of extravagance and exactly the sort of a canapé I would chase a member of staff around a tent for. In third place was a picture of simplicity: The English Canapé Company's game terrine with a hint of mulberry and the crunch of a salted thyme game chip. Morsels of sheer delight. 🐿️

Canapé dos and don'ts

- **Don't try to put an eight-course tasting menu onto a 2in-diameter cracker**
- Don't make anything that can't be eaten in one mouthful
- **If it's chewy, don't do it. Canapés need to aid conversation, not embarrass the guest**
- Don't make a tray so elaborate and heavy that the waiting staff need to pump iron for six weeks before they come to work
- **Don't create too narrow an array of canapés. Keep dazzling guests with**

each tray that arrives in the room

- Do serve cheese straws. Nothing better complements a chilled glass of Krug
- **Do hand out little sausages, as they sate hunger—but avoid drenching them in honey**
- Do create a series of canapés that mimic the courses of dinner, finishing with a sweet flourish
- **Do create a mix of meat, fish and veg. And cater for vegans, too**
- Do serve oysters. Especially if I'm coming

