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**CALIFORNIA GIANT ANNOUNCES 3<sup>RD</sup> ANNUAL CHEF INVITATIONAL WINNERS**

**WATSONVILLE, CA (July 8, 2020)** – California Giant Berry Farms hosted its 3<sup>rd</sup> annual Chef Invitational culinary competition over a three-week period which highlighted six of the foodservice industry’s finest.

This year’s Top Chef winner goes to Chef Sam Blackburn of Sodexo North America, for his Pan-Seared Pacific Halibut with Pickled Strawberries and Fermented Blueberry Bacon Fried Quinoa and Blackberry Mushroom Sauté. Voted against the criteria of best overall appearance, flavor and taste appeal, creativity, use of ingredients and utilization of berries, the judges agreed that Chef Blackburn’s dish used berries in the most unique way that packed a very flavorful punch.

“What I love about this dish is that everything about it is outside of the box. The heat from the chili pepper beautifully awakens the whole dish, and it goes so well with the tanginess of the fermented blueberries,” said wellness expert and two-time cookbook author, Marie Reginato, who recreated each of the six finalist’s dishes with video and photo components used on the competition website and social media platforms.

In addition to the prestigious title of Top Chef, the six chef finalists had the chance to win the People’s Choice vote. The website received an overwhelming response to this voting option with over 93,000 total votes.

The winner of the People’s Choice award goes to Bill Barker, of Markon / Gordon Foodservice, for his Tres Berry Cakesicles. “This recipe is so beautifully prepared. The colors are just gorgeous, and I love the use of adding the actual berry puree into the cake popsicle mixture,” remarked Reginato.

A new element to this year’s prize structure is the added feature of a non-profit organization of each chef’s choice. As winner of Top Chef, Chef Blackburn wins \$1,000 cash for himself and a matching grant towards his selected non-profit organization, Sodexo Stop Hunger Foundation, as well as event participation as brand ambassador for California Giant throughout the year. People’s Choice winner, Chef Barker wins \$500 cash and a matching grant to his selected non-profit, St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.

“Although we had to adapt our in-person event into a virtual competition, we are encouraged by the incredible work that has gone into this and the amazing results with the People’s Choice voting online,” said Tom Smith, Director of Foodservice & Organic Sales for California Giant. “I am pleased that our California Giant Berry Farms Chef Invitational continues to garner more awareness for the brand and highlight the amazing talent from within the Foodservice industry,” Smith added.

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