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Georgia touts its flavors

Contest promotes products across state

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Like giant Tonka toys, red, blue and green tractors gleam in the sunshine Tuesday outside the Georgia Freight Depot at Underground Atlanta. It's AgDay in Georgia. Schoolchildren in green FFA T-shirts scurry into the building. Gov. Sonny Perdue is scheduled to appear soon, and the folks gathered in the depot's Blue Room seem anxious, but in a good way.

They're waiting for Perdue to announce the winners of the first Flavor of Georgia food contest, which highlights products grown or made in Georgia.

Those include the sweet amber thickness of the Savannah Bee Co.'s tupelo honey, which won for best natural or organic product. And the sweet and sour soulfulness of Byne Blueberry Farm's blueberry salsa from Waynesboro, which won in the jams, jellies and sauces category.

The brainchild of Kent Wolfe, a marketing analyst at the University of Georgia's Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, the contest is a way for Georgia producers to make their names — and products — known to consumers. Sort of like "American Idol," only the contestants are pecans and shrimp.

"Georgia-produced or -grown products are often easy to make, but hard to market," Wolfe said. "We want Georgia growers and food manufacturers to have a way to get their products in the hands of the consumer, to be seen. Hopefully, this contest will help."

All the products in the contest — from pulled pork barbecue to candy clay dough to muscadine wine — have a Georgia ingredient or connection.

For Lai Reed, owner of R.P. Hill Exotic Sauce Co. in Atlanta, cooking is a way to unwind after getting home from her day job as a research supervisor in Emory's Department of Psychology.

"Cooking is creative and intense," said Reed, who named her company after her dogs, Rhodie and Pavlov. "It's a good way for me to get my mind off other people's troubles."

For Reed, and others like Rena Richardson of auNaturale Baby, the contest puts their products in front of a host of people who wouldn't normally be able to see or taste them.

Richardson, a former captain in the Army, started her freshly prepared organic baby food company with no prior food or marketing experience, a la Diane Keaton in "Baby Boom."

"It's been incredibly challenging," said Richardson, whose son, Christopher, was on hand to prove the popularity of her mashed sweet potatoes with the 2-and-under set. "I've had to reinvent myself."

The payoff for Reed's Brandy Mandarin Orange BBQ sauce, which won the prize in the barbecue and hot sauces category, is a plaque and braggin' rights — winners can advertise and display on their product for one year that they were chosen as the best in the Flavor of Georgia food contest.

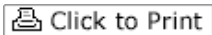
The contest's sponsors include UGA's Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development, UGA's College of Agricultural and Environmental Science's Department of Food and Science Technology, the Governor's Agricultural Advisory Commission, and the Georgia Rural Development Council.

The other Flavor of Georgia winners are:

- **Confections:** The Byrd Cookie Co.'s Georgia peach cookies.
- **Wine:** Persimmon Creek Vineyard's late harvest riesling.
- **Meat products:** Bradley Creek Seafood's Lowcountry pastry prototype (a pastry cup filled with Georgia shrimp and lots of cream and cheese), which also won the grand prize for the contest.
- **Snack foods:** Bodacious Food Co.'s traditional cheese straws.
- **Other:** Vidalia Brands Inc.'s onion and spinach quiche.

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