

# Behind the Cancellation of James Beard Awards, Worries About Chefs' Behavior and No Black Winners

The decision to put the honors, the Oscars of American restaurants, on hiatus came amid concerns about a lack of diversity and allegations against some nominees.

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The James Beard major awards to restaurants and chefs, usually announced each May in Chicago, were first postponed, then called off. Clay Williams

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*(Update: Aug. 28, 2020. This article has been updated to note that Pete Wells served on the James Beard awards' restaurant committee for two years.)*

The [James Beard](#) Foundation's declaration last week that [it would not announce the winners](#) of this year's major restaurant and chef awards startled Blake Spalding and Jen Castle, the two chefs who own [Hell's Backbone Grill & Farm](#) in Boulder, Utah.

The week before, Ms. Spalding and Ms. Castle had taped a short video at the foundation's request in which they pretended to accept the award they had been nominated for, Best Chef Mountain. Told to give a 30-second acceptance speech, they thanked their employees, then clapped and laughed for 90 seconds, as if they had just won.

All the nominees were being asked to make a video like this, they were told. Still, they allowed themselves to get their hopes up. Then they got a mass email from the foundation, calling the whole thing off.

"We were really gutted," Ms. Spalding said. "It was a really demoralizing and wrenching thing to be so close and have them be, 'Never mind.' "

Jen Castle, left, and Blake Spalding were nominated for their work as chefs of Hell's Backbone Grill & Farm in Boulder, Utah. "What does my nomination even mean now that it's been canceled?" Ms. Spalding asked. Christopher P. Michel

She was not the only one taken by surprise. Several people on the volunteer committee that administers the restaurant awards said they learned about an hour before the announcement that there would be no new winners this year because they seemed "minor" compared with the hardships restaurants now face.

The foundation's news release said the decision not to name winners in 2020 or 2021 had been made "after serious deliberation and consultation with members of the industry, Award committees, JBF staff, and partners."

But the days leading up to the decision were so frantic that many people close to the awards say they aren't quite sure what had happened.

With the winners' names to be broadcast at a virtual ceremony set for late September, the foundation struggled to stay on schedule as the ground shifted beneath its feet. Restaurant workers were taking to social media to [denounce their bosses](#). The restaurant-going public was rapidly changing its notions of which chef behaviors should be rewarded, which overlooked and which shunned. As Black Lives Matter protests bloomed across the country, patience was growing thin over how few opportunities are given to Black chefs, including the opportunity to win Beard awards.

The James Beard Foundation itself was trying to leave behind its origins as a group that celebrated the restaurant industry, and [make itself over](#) as one that led the charge for reform.

It was a lot to handle. By last week, the foundation's leaders had settled on calling off the rest of the 2020 awards season, which only a few days before had seemed like a remote possibility.

The short list of nominees had been announced in May. The final vote had been cast and counted soon afterward. But in July and August, the slate of nominees began to crumble, according to interviews with foundation officials, nominees and members of the committee that administers the restaurant and chef awards.

Some chefs took themselves out of the running. The foundation asked others to drop out, having deemed them too controversial because new allegations about their personal or professional behavior had surfaced over the summer. The critics, reporters and other media people on the restaurant awards committee say they were overwhelmed by the number and speed with which chefs were falling under suspicion.

At an emergency meeting held on Zoom in late July, a foundation staff

member who had seen the final voting results raised a second concern: No Black people had won in any of the 23 categories on the ballot.

This would not have been a first for the James Beard awards. The foundation and the restaurant awards committee had promised many times recently, though, to field more diverse slates of candidates. Many observers saw progress. This year, a number of Black chefs were named as semifinalists or nominees. But they had lost in the final round of voting, according to people who were briefed on the racial breakdown of the results.

“The message came through that they knew who the winners were, and the winners didn’t look like they want them to look,” said one committee member, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of concerns about violating the nondisclosure agreement everyone on the panel is required to sign.

After some discussion, a suggestion was placed before the committee. “We proposed removing previous winners” from the voting body, said Mitchell Davis, the foundation’s chief strategy officer.

According to the procedures described on the foundation’s website, votes on the restaurant and chef awards are given to the 20 members of the restaurant committee, to the 200 or so regional judges they appoint, and to hundreds of people who have won awards in the past.

Established in 1990, the awards program embraces several fields, including design, journalism, books and broadcast media. But the prizes that are called the Oscars of the food world are the ones given to chefs and restaurants. (This reporter has received six of the journalism awards, and served on the restaurant awards committee in 2005 and 2006.)

The restaurant and chef awards have long mirrored the American restaurant business itself, whose highest slopes of power and prestige have tended to be the preserve of white men cooking food mainly derived from Western

Europe.

Mr. Davis and others see the voting bloc of previous winners as a possible source of what he calls "systemic bias." But taking them out of the process after the votes had been counted struck many members of the restaurant committee as foul play.

"The committee was like, if the results aren't what we wanted, tough," said one member, who asked not to be named because of the nondisclosure agreement. "We're not going to get into vote rigging."

There was less resistance to another proposal: a second vote, with the regular group of voters. The ballot would be edited to remove nominees the foundation now saw as problematic. But as summer went on, that list kept getting longer.

"The longer they waited, the more they learned about people," another committee member said.

Jessica Koslow, nominated in the Best Chef California category, in July withdrew her name as a candidate. Erik Carter for The New York Times

In July, Jessica Koslow, a Los Angeles chef, sent a letter to the foundation withdrawing as a candidate for Best Chef California. Her reputation had been [bruised by allegations](#) that she had taken credit for others' recipes, misled city health inspectors and allowed furry lids of mold to grow on pots of jam.

"Right now, my presence on the slate will only serve as a distraction," she wrote.

On social media and in news articles, other nominees were accused of abusing, underpaying or mistreating workers. Additional accusations were made privately to the foundation staff.

Several restaurant committee members, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that some of the allegations brought to them were so vague

that they weren't sure what the problem was. Lacking the time to investigate each case, the committee asked the foundation staff to follow up.

What happened next is in dispute. Committee members say they were waiting for more information about the allegations before making a decision. They also wanted the chefs to have a chance to tell their side of the story. But several chefs who received calls from the foundation say they had no chance to respond, and were given few details about what they were supposed to have done or who said they had done it.

Mr. Davis said that in deciding what to do about chefs who fell under suspicion, the foundation was guided by a recently adopted awards criterion that allows chefs to be disqualified for "allegations of criminal or unethical behavior, or behavior determined to be detrimental or contrary to the integrity and fair perception of the Awards."

If he or someone else from the foundation called a chef, Mr. Davis said, "we felt there was enough information to meet our eligibility criteria, which was about the reality that there is some controversy brewing that might affect the integrity of the awards."

Told that several chefs felt they had no chance to respond to the information against them, Mr. Davis said, "In questions when people in power are challenged in ways that might undermine that power, not enough weight is given to those who are making those challenges."

One nominated chef said that a representative of the foundation called two weeks ago to communicate a charge that was both anonymous and nebulous: "toxic kitchen culture."

"I said, 'Can you give me an example?' She said, 'That's it. Toxic kitchen culture.'"

The chef said the Beard representative suggested withdrawing from the

ballot. "She said, 'I'm in P.R., so I can give you a bunch of examples of how to do this.'"

This chef, who spoke anonymously to avoid being tainted by the suspicion of misbehavior, refused to drop out, and remains on the list of nominees.

Paul Bartolotta of Milwaukee was one of several chefs dropped from the list of nominees. He was a contender for Outstanding Restaurateur. John Gurzinski for The New York Times

Several other chefs disappeared last week from that list, though, including Rich Landau, Paul Bartolotta, Kristen Essig and Michael Stoltzfus. On the same day, the foundation announced that it would not be disclosing the winners.

Another name struck from the record belonged to the California chef David Kinch, a nominee in the Outstanding Chef category. Mr. Kinch [wrote in an Instagram post](#) on Aug. 15 that he had "decided to remove myself from consideration, and potential acceptance of this year's award."

No "single event" had led to the decision, he wrote, but "the idea of celebrating achievement — and all that our @manresarestaurant has accomplished — simply does not feel right in the midst of the ongoing pandemic, and the devastation it has pressed upon our chosen métier and industry."

Celebrating awards "simply does not feel right in the midst of the ongoing pandemic," wrote the chef David Kinch when he withdrew from the Outstanding Chef category. Christie Hemm Klok for The New York Times

In an email, Mr. Kinch said that withdrawing "was my decision only," and that his only communication about it with the James Beard Foundation was sending it a copy of his statement in advance.

Asked whether Mr. Kinch could be called a nominee for this year, Mr. Davis said: "I would say no. I would say the record has been amended."

Some people who work on the awards say they are concerned by how the

foundation handled the allegations against nominees.

"I'm really troubled by the lack of process and transparency," said Hanna Raskin, who has been on the restaurant committee for three years. "What I would like to know is, where is this information coming from and what are the standards? Do we have a list of disqualifiers? To me, it's a really big thing to remove somebody from a list."

The group's chief executive, Clare Reichenbach, said in a statement on Tuesday that the decision to cancel the awards was not made in haste, but added: "It is not a secret that we believe that there is work to be done in adapting our Awards policies to have a more fair and equitable playing field. If this means changing the way things have been done in the past, adapting judging privileges that have likely perpetuated bias, and taking a stronger stance on nominee behaviors that violate our guidelines, we are ready to do that for the betterment of the Awards and the community they serve."

Arguing about the awards is a long-running sport in the food business, but even by those standards the foundation's choice not to name winners has been divisive.

"It makes no sense to me," said Alan Richman, a journalist and occasional New York Times contributor who once served on the restaurant awards committee. "It seems they must have found some intrinsic flaw in the voting. What else could it be? If they found a flaw in the voting, they should say so."

Ms. Raskin and others feel that the foundation has passed up an easy chance to help restaurants whose survival is threatened by the pandemic.

"What stands out to me about this decision is that the vote was conducted, winners were chosen and those winners weren't allowed to know that they won," she said. "In this time of crisis for the hospitality industry, the foundation had an opportunity to do right by even one person, and decided not to do that for reasons that remain unclear."



With the traditional Beard awards on pause until 2022, the foundation has said it is taking a year to work with all seven of its awards committees and “an outside social justice agency” to settle on new ground rules. The goal, the foundation said, is to “remove any systemic bias” and make the rosters of candidates even more diverse.

Paola Velez, a pastry chef in Washington, was nominated in the Rising Star Chef category, which recognizes chefs age 30 or younger. When the awards return in 2022, she will be too old to qualify. Even so, she said that she doesn’t mind that the world will never know whether she won this year.

“I’m an Afro-Dominican girl from the Bronx,” she wrote in an email. “My nomination has inspired so many, including myself. It’s not about winning or losing for me.”

In Utah, Blake Spalding has had a harder time accepting that the award she was nominated for will never be given out.

“It feels risky to me to criticize the foundation,” she said. “But in a year when they had more women and racially diverse chefs as nominees than ever, why not make every nominee a winner? What does my nomination even mean now that it’s been canceled?”

“I am for a more just restaurant industry and a more just country,” she said. “There are a lot of dodgy practices in the restaurant industry that need to be changed. But is this going to change it, canceling the awards?”

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