

Windsor student chefs wow judges

High school students wow judges

By Ted Whipp, The Windsor Star June 2, 2010



Iron Gryphon competition champions from Century high school, from left to right, Raquell Willis, Jessamine Kane, Luke Howe, and Chris Hackbarth display culinary creations at Chez Talbot at St. Clair College in Windsor, Ont., on May 28, 2010.

Photograph by: Jason Kryk, The Windsor Star

WINDSOR, Ont. — Call this kitchen competition, Iron Chefs: Student Edition.

Just like the Food Network TV show, teams of Windsor high school student chefs were in a smack-down, pressure-cooker culinary challenge. The two teams in the recent final round went head-to-head at St. Clair College, preparing and plating three dishes in an hour with a secret ingredient revealed late in their menu planning.

The four-member teams from Century and Assumption high schools survived qualifying rounds and withstood judges and the heat of the kitchen. In the end, Century's team took home the top honours.

Still, both teams created complicated dishes and impressed judges from the industry so much they said they'd recruit them for their restaurants or the college's culinary arts programs. They were that good, observers said.

"The quality and skill level of the student teams have completely blown away the judges," said Art Barron, who helped organize the competition.

A co-ordinator with the School College Work Initiative that develops projects for the transition from high school to college, Barron said the competition received strong support from both school boards. Galati Cheese of Windsor, and Highline Mushrooms of Leamington, provided cheeses and mushrooms for secret ingredients. Winning team members each received a special skillet customized as a plaque and an apprentice chef tool kit, supplied by the South Western Ontario Industry Education Council, which develops work-related education programs for schools.

The culinary arts students were treated like champions, arriving at the college by limousine. And the Iron Gryphon Competition, named for St. Clair's gryphon on its logo, proved so successful college and high school organizers alike aim to do it again.

The competing students might agree, despite the judges' comments.

"Omigosh, that's the hardest," said Grade 12 Assumption student Heather Harvie, 17. "You're standing there and listening to their comments and their criticism."

Still, the event provides realism, she said of the opportunity to experience the fast pace of a cooking competition. Team member Dallas Boow, 16, in Grade 11 at Assumption, especially liked the heat of the competition. "It's a good experience to be in the environment and see what it's like."

Jessamine Kane, 15, in Grade 10 at Century, prepared a dish that scored the highest, a mascarpone cheese and lemon mousse.

"I'm proud of myself; I'm proud of my team," she said.

David Cantin, a St. Clair chef-instructor, said all of the students showed poise. He emphasized such competitions can provide a valuable learning experience, especially for students to hear informative comments from people outside their high school setting.

"It's hard for students to hear what's wrong with their dishes," Cantin said. "This may be the first objective criticism they've heard outside their own classroom."

Competition judges help validate classroom teachers, said Ron Hart, a culinary arts teacher with Century's team.

"The takeaway from this for students is this competition opens their eyes."

Criticism comes with the territory for chefs in the kitchen, Cantin said. "We're judged constantly. So this is a great environment for them to hear it."

Diane Nehmetallah, an Assumption culinary arts teacher, said that besides the competition, the students experience the college setting, seeing for themselves the teaching kitchen facilities at St. Clair.

As St. Clair judges dissected the dishes, their comments provided pointers. While they raved about the mousse, Eva Cross, a St. Clair chef-instructor, pointed out the berries for a garnish should be placed so the holes for the stems aren't exposed. A cucumber with an Assumption dish was sliced too thick. And the cheese flavour became lost in a mini pita item.

Still, the young chefs showed talent, Cantin said.

"I thought the students showed a lot of promise," Cross agreed. "I hope they're coming our way."

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WINNING MENU

Century dishes included a Fruzlano cheese, ratatouille strudel with fresh tomato sauce, a reggianito cheese and tomato flan with apple, beet and fennel slaw, and a mascarpone and lemon mousse with brandy snap basket and fresh berries.

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Assumption High School's Iron Gryphon student chef team members are, from left: Dallas Boow, 16, Grade 11; Kathleen Burns, 17, Grade 12; Stavro Zura, 18, Grade 12; Heather Harvie, 17, Grade 12.

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