

Culinary Arts Team Cooks Up Winning Recipe

Thursday, May 3, 2012

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LEFT TO RIGHT: TEAM ADVISOR CHEF LEN MARTIN, ANTHONY VALENTINE, ELAINA D'ORTO, JACK GOLDBERG, KEN FLESHER, TRAVIS PATNO AND DIRECTOR OF THE THOMPSON SCHOOL OF APPLIED SCIENCE REGINA SMICK-ATTISANO

They make up the Thompson School of Applied Science's culinary Dream Team. Taking the field of culinary competition by storm, five of the oven hot UNH chefs-in-training brought home the bronze in an unprecedented win at the New Hampshire State American Culinary Federation (ACF) Competition this spring.

And they're only freshmen.

Charlie Caramihalis, professor of culinary arts and nutrition, is excited about the talent he's seen among this group of students who make up the Culinary Team. "We couldn't be prouder, but it's not about us. It's about the students," says Caramihalis.

Students Elaina D'Orto, Ken Flesher, Jack Goldberg, Travis Patno, and Anthony Valentine combined their strengths in culinary and cooking techniques, as well as sanitation practices, by competing against other college teams to attract the attention of a panel of austere judges. Withstanding the heat of the kitchen under the glare of such watchful eyes, the freshman filleted and sautéed . . . but they didn't flinch. "These judges are tough," says Caramihalis. "I've competed myself – they don't sugar coat anything. It's nerve-wracking."

It's not about intimidation, however; it's about gaining experience under pressure. "There are a lot of competitions in the culinary arts world," says Caramihalis. "It's how chefs grow and it's also a way of promoting the business. There's even a culinary Olympic team." According to the ACF Professional Culinary Competition Manual, the primary goals of a culinary competition are "to continually raise the standards of culinary excellence and professionalism" by nurturing individual creativity; showcasing a chef's skills, techniques, and styles; and offering certification points with the organization.

"The students put about 140 hours into practicing for this competition. Once they had the skills down, we moved to practicing the menu they had to prepare which was taken from Escoffier's cookbook," says team adviser Chef Len Martin, referring to the legendary chef who was a leader in the development of modern French cuisine.

Martin, who was not allowed to be with the students during the competition in accordance with the federation's rules, first glimpsed the plated food as it was presented to the judges. When Martin saw the julienned carrots, duchess potatoes, and poached forcemeat accompanying the stuffed breast of chicken, he was impressed. "I thought they did really well. All the time that they put into practicing was reflected in the food on the plates," says Martin. "It was very intense for the students. They had to dedicate their time, and then at the end, when they saw how well they did, they were flying high."

Jack Goldberg '13 was charged with leading the Culinary Team to create the main course of the competition. "It was chicken breast stuffed with ox tongue, topped with a suprême sauce," says Goldberg of the roux reduced with crème fraîche. "This was particularly challenging because we had to break down the classical recipe into manageable terms." Even as the team felt overwhelmed by the gamut of rules in the unfamiliar territory of culinary competition, they rose to the challenge. Said Goldberg,

“We really worked hard, came together as a team, overcame challenges, had some fun, and pulled it off.”

“To have the guts to compete and then go out there and win is huge,” says Caramihalis who has stewarded thousands of students through his courses in the culinary arts – in subjects such as American regional cuisine, quantity food production, catering and garde manger, and more – for nearly three decades. With that kind of experience he knows a talented student when he meets one and he is honored to impart his knowledge as a chef, restaurant owner, and professor who has a passion for culinary arts in the genes.

As a youth, Caramihalis began pitching bait with his fisherman father before sunrise. “We’d sell our catch to the Cape Neddick Lobster Pound. They were looking for someone to work at night and I wanted the job. I’d work all day and then go to the restaurant and work the grill. I fell in love with it right away. Caramihalis understands that students who come to the Thompson School’s Culinary Arts and Nutrition program are here for the love of the craft, too, and that shaped his vision for the program he helped transform from its roots as the Restaurant Management program nearly four years ago.

“The great thing for us is that it’s virtually unheard of for a culinary team to win a medal the first time they compete. They won based on their ability to perform what they’re taught here.” One of the team members is non-traditional student Elaina D’Orto ’13, who is finally pursuing her long-held dream to become a chef after a career in the military. The Thompson School’s hands-on approach to learning by doing during regular and off-peak hours allows students of all walks of life to gain ample practical experience at the two onsite restaurants that are open to the public – 180 Blue and Stacey’s Express – in addition to classroom lectures.

Beginning next fall, incoming freshmen will be given a junior membership in the Piscataqua Chapter of the American Culinary Federation and the opportunity to broaden their newfound skills through culinary competition. “Competing helps build a stronger program and gives students more practice,” says Caramihalis about the curriculum designed to build students’ résumés and give them an advantage over the competition in a tough job market. “You need to change with the field. It’s all about trying to make sure you’re giving the kids the best education.”

For students who qualify to become Certified Cooks, the breadth of the Culinary Arts and Nutrition program – enhanced by competitions and hands-on internships at local establishments and institutions – provides the strong foundation in which to develop their natural talent and passion for the craft.

Originally published by:
[COLSA Insight, Newsletter of the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture](#)

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