

L&G 'Amigas' impress Jr. Iron Chef judges

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TOWNSHEND -- The Leland & Gray "Rebel Amigas" began practicing last fall for Vermont's Junior Iron Chef competition.

They worked on their chosen dish -- a vegetable and tofu cilantro naan with parsnip quenelle and chili dipping sauce. And, in the process, the five team members developed more than their culinary skills: They built cohesiveness.

"When we cook, it's like everybody has their own job," said eighth-grader Nastia Stevens. "You don't need to tell them to do something. They do it."

She added that, when it came time for the March 22 statewide competition in Essex Junction, "we weren't really worried about the food at all."

The Leland & Gray team's rapport and unity of purpose garnered a Junior Iron Chef "Mise en Place" award. The honor is given to "the team that shows exemplary teamwork, order and professionalism," and it brings a big smile to the face of coach Joe Gerardi.

"I'm just so proud of these girls for that professionalism that they brought together for their team," Gerardi said.

Junior Iron Chef is a collaboration between Burlington School Food Project and Vermont FEED, which stands for "food education every day." That speaks to the dedication shown by Leland & Gray team members, who met once a week since the beginning of the school year "to create the recipe and fine-tune it and perfect their skills," said Sue Jones, a family and consumer-science teacher who also is involved with the team.

The Rebel Amigas consist of Leland & Gray junior Casey Williams; ninth-grader Bailey Gouin; Stevens; and seventh-graders Kaylah Jacobs and Fairen Stark.

Competition rules require the use of at least five Vermont ingredients. The Amigas' list is longer than that, showing ingredients drawn from local spots such as Green Mountain Creamery in Brattleboro, Westminster Organics in Westminster and Dutton Berry Farm in Newfane.

Jones said team members, "once they designed a recipe and kind of tweaked it after a handful of practices," naturally fell into specific roles. Mindful of the pressure-packed, close-quartered cooking of the competition, they also tried to replicate that environment during practice.

"During the year, they set up the tables ... and they went ahead and prepared the dishes just like they were in competition," said Gerardi, a food service director for The Abbey Group.

The Enosburg Falls-based company handles Leland & Gray's food service and donated food for the team's practice sessions. The Abbey Group also contributed the Amigas' distinctive, bright green jackets.

"They stood out," Gerardi said with a laugh.

The Rebel Amigas were one of more than 60 Vermont teams that converged on Champlain Valley Exposition for the Junior Iron Chef event. Jacobs, who said she volunteered for the team because she "thought it was cool, and I never heard of a cooking competition," recalled feeling a touch of nervousness when seeing other teams' planned entries.

"When I saw the other recipes -- when I read them -- I'm like, 'Whoa, there's some extravagant recipes,'" she said.

There also was the fact that, due to the age range of team members, the Amigas had to compete in the high school division even though most of the Leland & Gray team members are middle schoolers and all were first-time competitors.

But the Amigas got down to business, and they apparently were all business in preparing 16 small plated portions for judges and two larger portions for display over the course of 90 minutes.

"Once they started, they were in a zone," Jones said.

Stark remembers the heat of competition -- literally.

"It's really hot in there because everyone has their hot plates, and everyone's cooking," she said.

But, about an hour after competition ended, Stark said it was "unreal" when the Amigas learned about their award.

The Rebel Amigas returned home with prize packages including a cookbook, cutting board, whisk and serving spoon. Additionally, they won an induction cooker and a full set of cookware that can be used for next year's Iron Chef team.

The Amigas also gained, in their words, "teamwork," "new cooking techniques" and "awesome friends."

Gerardi, who trained at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., marveled at the success of his team members in spite of their inexperience.

"They went up dry, for the first time, and won an award for professionalism," he said. "To keep that small area in a neat, orderly fashion, and produce a good dish out of that, is quite hard."

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