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The next great young chefs

A contest looks for future kings and queens of the kitchen.

By Walter F. Naedele

Inquirer Staff Writer

A word to high school seniors who agonized over college scholarship applications:

Folks, you could have cooked your way into college.

Simple?

Shrimp cocktail, chicken breast, broccoli and rice pilaf. Maybe not so simple.

Yesterday, 10 high school seniors from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York and Virginia were in two of the kitchens of the Art Institute of Philadelphia on Market Street, across from the headquarters of Peco Energy.

Two finalists each won a \$2,000 scholarship to their choice of an AI culinary program, leading to a two-year associate degree or a four-year bachelor's degree.

Chef William Tillinghast, director of the culinary and pastry programs at the Philadelphia school, said the two-year program "comes in at about \$35,000 - tuition and uniform, books, knife kit."

Each also won a May trip to Las Vegas, to compete with winners from 29 other Art Institutes for \$40,000 scholarships, likewise to the schools' culinary studies.

The names of the winners in Philadelphia are at the end. Don't peek.

The first two to finish - the starting times were staggered every 15 minutes - had something in common.

Grandmas. Cooking grandmas.

Sitting in a corridor still in his kitchen whites after his two-hour ordeal, Alexander Saraullo said his father's mother, Amelia Saraullo, was his family's renowned cook.

"She's the reason why I got into it," he said.

All 10 contestants cooked two trays of the same meal - one for a set of tasting judges, one for a set of presentation judges.

How well it tasted, how well it looked. That's what would make this day significant.

But Saruallo said he was especially proud when he accompanied his presentation to the first-floor AI restaurant.

The trays were meant only to be displayed, but his grandmother, ever the judge in her family, wanted a taste - "Is there a fork?"

Saruallo, 17, travels from his home near Ninth and Morris Streets in South Philadelphia to the Philadelphia Electrical and Technology Charter High School in Center City.

But his heart is at the Palm, the Broad Street restaurant south of City Hall.

Since the end of November, he has worked at the Palm as part of a school program. "I'm a prep boy, kitchen help . . . slice the onions."

He's looking forward to an AI bachelor's degree in culinary management. "I want to be an executive chef, with my own establishment," he said.

In the Linden, N.J., family of Cassandra Torres, the beloved cook is her mother's Dominican mother, Altagracia Garcia.

"She's taught me since I was 7," Torres said, "since I could see over the stove."

Two or three days a week, she goes to Garcia's house, where most recently "we cooked beans - pinto beans - and *salchichon* - a sausage - and sweet plantain."

A senior at Linden High School, Torres worked free - "for the learning" - last fall at a Hell's Kitchen restaurant in Manhattan.

Now she is a waitress at the Two Tonys' Pizza Café in Linden.

Her dream?

"To be a pastry chef," she said as she washed the pots and pans used during her two-hour test. "And to own my own restaurant. One day."

The 41 Art Institutes in North America constitute one of four sets of schools owned by Education Management Corp. of Pittsburgh. Thirty of the Art Institutes offer culinary studies.

Yesterday, the New York City institute, which has no culinary program and no kitchens, sent four students to compete with six from Philadelphia's Mid-Atlantic region.

And so, the winners:

Timothy Lu, 18, of Great Neck, N.Y., and Nathaniel Toepke, 18, of Lofton, Va., won the \$2,000 scholarships and trips to the national finals.

Silver medals were given to Arlene Ambrose, 17, of Spring Valley, N.Y., and Justin Rising, 18, of Middletown, Del.

Saraullo won the lone bronze medal.

Contact staff writer Walter F. Naedele at 610-701-7614 or wnaedele@phillynews.com.

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