



BATTLE FOR BEST PLATE

Claire M. Regan For the Staten Island Advance

It was just another day in the dining hall at Wagner College as students lined up for the typical lunchtime fare of hamburgers, turkey burgers, fried rice and pizza. Until Food Network celebrity chef Jet Tila grabbed a mic. “Make it good! Make it fresh!” he coached three teams at the far end of the room who were ready to start chopping, sautéing and seasoning last Tuesday afternoon for a Battle of the Staten Island Chefs. Students from Wagner College and the culinary arts programs of Port Richmond High School and Tottenville High School made up the teams, with guidance from executive chefs Matthew Miluk of the Hilton Garden Inn in Bloomfield, Eddie Canlon of Canlon’s Restaurant in Oakwood and Michael Purpura of Wagner Dining Services. **SEE BATTLE, C2**



Chef Jet Tila served as an unofficial master of ceremonies during the competition, talking with students as they prepared their team's dish.



Students on the Tottenville High School team concentrate while preparing food during the competition.



The first-place team from the Port Richmond High School culinary arts program included Alyssa Mae Gadsden, Mia Obadiaru, Troy McCoy, Amaris Rodriguez, Raven Columbus and Arturo Quintero. Photos by Claire Regan/For the Staten Island Advance

BATTLE

Mimicking popular Food Network cooking shows like “Cutthroat Kitchen,” “Iron Chef America” and “Chopped,” the competition required each team to prepare an entrée for a panel of judges in a limited amount of time.

As they labored, Chef Tila worked the area like a stand-up comedian, interrupting the student chefs with quips and questions.

Richard Guarasci, Wagner College president, served as a judge and added to the repartee at Chef Tila’s invitation.

“Wow. I’ve never seen such a massacre of a pineapple,” he joked about the team from his school.

Wagner’s Chef Purpura coached Tottenville High School students Rusty Demcak and John David on the proper technique for chopping green onions and basil.

“Cut on an angle,” he said succinctly.

Dishes of pan-seared tilapia over farro risotto, stir-fried lo mein and Chex Mix crusted tilapia over hash were served to the salivating judges who graded each on eye appeal, uniqueness, color and texture, aroma and taste, temperature, degree of difficulty and overall presen-



Student competitors were required to complete an entrée with a 25-minute time limit.

tion. Chef Tila kept the ambience convivial. But the stakes were high and the rules were strict. “While judges are grading the dish, students are not allowed to interfere, persuade or come in contact anywhere near them,” the evaluation sheet warned. “If this happens, disqualification will take place immediately!”

‘HARD WORK PAYS OFF’ Finally it was time to review the scores and declare a winner. “Third place goes to ...

the Green Team!” Chef Tila announced, referring to the Wagner College students, who masked their disappointment well. Tottenville High School earned second place and Port Richmond High School was the top winner.

“When you’re dedicated, your hard work pays off,” summarized Mia Obadiaru of the winning team, which also included Alyssa Mae Gadsden, Troy McCoy, Amaris Rodriguez, Raven Columbus and Arturo Quintero. Gift cards, Bluetooth portable speakers and Fitbit



Chef Jet Tila hops up on a table for a group selfie with the cooking teams.

watches were distributed as prizes.

Chef Miluk of the Hilton appreciated the event as a learning opportunity.

“The kids got to see what it’s like to prepare food under the gun, and what it’s like to put out a great product with

little time.”

Miluk should know. He recently served 900 entrées at the Teddy Atlas dinner and 700 more Thursday at a Daughters of St. Paul fundraiser, both at the Hilton.

“All the kids were amazing,” Chef Tila beamed as

cleanup got under way. “The level of interest in culinary arts has never been like this” at the high school and college levels.

“It’s cool now,” to study culinary, he said. “Kids look at chefs like sports figures and musicians.”