

36TH ANNUAL CULINARY ARTS COMPETITION

ARMY CHEFS

SOUP UP

THEIR SKILLS

By C. Todd Lopez
Army News Service

It's not likely what was being cooked up at Fort Lee, Va., last month will ever show up on the menu in a dining facility downrange. But, the Soldiers manning the skillets there are certain to deploy, and when they do, they'll take with them the skills they demonstrated in March.

"There's probably not a lot of *pâte à choux* being served in Afghanistan right now, except for maybe ... some decorating around Christmas or Thanksgiving," said Chief Warrant Officer 4 Russell Campbell of the delicate pastry dough frequently seen at the 36th Annual Culinary Arts Competition, held March 3-9 at Fort Lee. He served as the show chair for the event.

"But, the competencies these chefs and service members train for and prepare for to come here do correlate directly to the service they provide to their service members if they are in Iraq

and Afghanistan. It builds their pride in their profession, and helps their skills and creativity," Campbell said.

The competition pitted military food service professionals against themselves and each other to showcase the best skills.

Inside the field house where the competition was held, two mobile Army containerized kitchens — stainless steel boxes, like trailer homes outfitted with everything needed to cook hot meals for an Army in the field — stood against one wall.

In one of the two kitchens, a team of Soldiers assigned to the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea prepared an Asian-themed meal featuring a Thai-style sweet-and-spicy seafood soup, chicken adobo with citrus rice, and a dessert featuring a chocolate torte and a mouse of pomegranate and lime.

About 30 feet away in the second containerized kitchen, Soldiers from other units in Korea — part of the U.S. Forces Korea team — prepared a meal featuring items like a seafood bisque, an apple forcemeat-stuffed pork loin, potato gnocchi, sautéed green beans wrapped in prosciutto, and a dessert with bread pudding, bananas Foster and a peanut butter mousse.

The two teams each had four hours to prepare from scratch meals for 80 paying customers as part of the field competition. Spectators were allowed to purchase tickets to become customers in the "restaurant" that was built in front of the mobile kitchens.

Sgt. Brian Baker of the 557th Military Police Company, Camp Humphreys, South Korea, was one of the military chefs competing as part of the USFK team. He was responsible for preparing the team's entree, the pork loin. He said timing was the most difficult thing for him in this part of the competition.

"It was 80 servings of pork loin, and I couldn't do any prep for that," he said. "I had to fabricate my proteins here on site. I had to trim off the fat and stuff I didn't want to use, remove some to make my forcemeat, butterfly it out and pound them out, and line them with spinach."

Baker piped the forcemeat, a paste of pork trimmings and apple, onto the pork loin and spinach, then rolled them up and tied them with a string in preparation for browning and baking in the mobile kitchen.



Sgt. Michelle Carville hurries her dishes out to the judges' table during the Culinary Arts Competition at Fort Lee, Va., last month.

Photo by T. Anthony Bell



Above: A judge converses with Sgt. Marc Susa, who is stationed at Fort McPherson, Ga.

Photo by C. Scott Lopez

Left: Sgt. Stanley Mickens of Team Fort Bliss places chunks of venison on a searing plate during the field cooking competition.

Photo by Spc. Phil Kernisan

During the competition, the power went out in the USFK kitchen. “But we adjusted best we could and kept trucking,” Baker said. “We were able to pull it out.” The team came away from the competition with a silver medal.

Their competitors from the 2nd Infantry Division, however, took gold. Staff Sgt. Jeffrey Blanchette, the team’s manager, said teamwork was critical to their success. “If you have a great team, no matter what equipment you’re cooking on, you can do well,” Blanchette said.

At the center of the competition were the cold food displays — probably the most time-intensive, detail-oriented part of the competition. Each team’s table represented about 24 hours worth of nonstop work, theme-oriented displays of hors d’oeuvres, appetizers, desserts, entrees and buffet platters. Nearly every piece of food on the table looked like a tiny, glazed piece of artwork.

It “represents their skills and abilities to present an artistic display of food, their development of menus, compositions, desserts — even their detail they do in their petit four work,” said Sgt. Maj. Mark Warren, sergeant major of the Joint Culinary Center of Excellence at Fort Lee. “This is one of the best examples of paying attention to details.”

Staff Sgt. Michael Bogle, assigned to the Army Executive Dining Facility at the Pentagon, earned a silver medal for his contribution to his team’s table.

His platter featured five tiny dessert items — small cakes and pastries — all under the team’s “farm to table” theme.

“We used ingredients from around Virginia; Washington, D.C.; and Maryland,” he said. “This is actually a Maryland Smith Island cake, done to a small scale.”

The tiny cake pieces, all six of them, were arranged on a granite slab along with four other types of dessert pieces he had created — a total of about 30 pieces in all, each meant to be consumed in about one bite, he said.

Attention to detail required for the competition becomes apparent when considering the amount of time it took Bogle to make just those six tiny pieces of cake:

“Just this one, from start to finish, [took] about five hours,” he said. “You have to make sure the cuts are exactly the same. You have to make sure the sugar is the same.”

The competition showcases the talents of military chefs from all branches of the armed forces and includes the most junior service members in the culinary arts profession, such as those with less than one year of service, to those with as much as 20 years’ experience. This year, more than 20 teams composed of 248 individual competitors participated in more than 638 different individual or team competitions.

“It continues to build on their profession and what they know, and there’s a lot of pride in the competition,” Campbell said. “They can go back to their friends and family and leadership and show what skills they didn’t know they had or maybe their leadership didn’t know. And we do a lot of training here as well.”