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PB & snapper: 9 young chefs show originality

Herald Staff

And then there were nine.

Three of the dozen Herald Chefs' Challenge competitors fell by the wayside after the first round, which pitted the culinary students against the clock and a mystery basket of ingredients ranging from snapper to peanut butter.

Once the basket was unveiled, each of the 12 -- all students at South Florida culinary schools -- had 15 minutes to write out a recipe (they didn't have to use every ingredient) and a mere 60 minutes to cook it.

"I was really surprised by the level of professionalism from all the kids, even some who were very young," said chef Dewey LoSasso, who selected the ingredients and oversaw the cook-off. "And it was nice to see that competitive eye they all have."

Sautéed snapper starred in most of the dishes, but there were plenty of original touches. The calabaza was turned into soup in one entry, gnocchi in another, roasted nuggets in a third and surprisingly tasty, raw, melon ball-like rounds in a fourth.

The level of sophistication was impressive, from citrus beurre monte (emulsified butter) for sautéing the fish to arugula oil and tomato tapenade for garnishing.

The atmosphere was tense but congenial in the kitchens of Florida International University's North Miami campus.

"By then end there was some real camaraderie developing, a little brotherhood," LoSasso said. "They were cheering each other on."

We'll see how long that lasts.

The winner receives two round-trip tickets on Spirit Airlines and an internship at LoSasso's restaurant, North One 10.

Judges are LoSasso, Herald Food Editor Kathy Martin and CBS4's Lisa Petrillo.

The criteria, in order of importance, are taste, presentation, creativity, organization, marketability (would it sell in a restaurant?), sanitation, culinary prowess and technique.

Contest sponsors are Sansó Foods and Spirit Airlines. Fish provided by Captain Jim Hanson's Seafood Market, North Miami. Kitchen facilities courtesy of Florida International University and North One 10.

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