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Wekiva High team aims to make some good eats for judges in NASA culinary contest

By Leslie Postal

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Wekiva High School student chefs Travis Grider, left, Nicholas Eberle, middle, and Erick Hendrickson, right, prepare food in the culinary arts kitchen at Wekiva High School in Apopka on Thursday, April 7, 2022. The students in the culinary arts program are going to Houston, Texas, to compete in a NASA contest to come up for new food for astronauts. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel)

The final test before the big cooking competition came down to packing. Could the team from Wekiva High School stuff into their suitcases most of the equipment needed to cook a three-course meal?

Yes, they could, and Monday the three 11th graders, along with their teacher and a chaperone, flew to Houston to compete in the finals of NASA-sponsored student culinary contest. Each student took two suitcases, one packed with an assortment of bowls, cake molds, cutting boards, knives, measuring cups, mixers and sauté pans.

They will shop for their ingredients Tuesday and compete Wednesday as a Top 10 finalist. The three teenagers will cook tandoori chicken, curried vegetables and a “lemon dream cake” for NASA’s judges, hoping their spread is tasty and meets all the strict nutritional requirements of a pre-flight, quarantine meal for astronauts.



Wekiva High School student chefs, from left: Erick Hendrickson, Travis Grider, and Nicholas Eberle are pictured in the culinary arts kitchen at Wekiva High School in Apopka on Thursday, April 7, 2022. The students in the culinary arts program are going to Houston, Texas, to compete in a NASA contest to come up with new food for astronauts. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel) (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel)

“I think it’s really fun, honestly,” said Erick Hendrickson, 17, as the Wekiva trio did a final practice run of their meal after school Friday. “We like food, and we like NASA because it’s cool.”

Erick, Nicholas Eberle, 17, and Travis Grider, 18, all expect to be nervous when they start prepping their food Wednesday morning.

“I’m worried about messing up a step,” said Travis, who is in charge of the curry.

Nicholas, in charge of dessert, said he worried the centers of individual cakes might fall once taken from the oven but quickly reminded himself that if they do, “It’s fixable.”

Erick said they were nervous during the preliminary competition, too, but those feelings eased as they focused on cooking. He expects that will happen Wednesday. “After a while, you calm down,” he said.

The NASA Hunch Culinary Challenge initially involved about 90 high school teams from across the country tasked with creating three recipes that met the agency’s nutritional guidelines, tasted good and could be cooked in two-and-a-half hours. The Wekiva team won its regional competition, then earned one of 10 spots in the finals after regional winners’ recipes were judged by experts at NASA’s Johnson Space Center.

Chris Bates, director of the magnet academy of culinary arts at Wekiva, said the three teenagers first won an in-school competition to form Wekiva's team for the NASA contest.

All are "very, very passionate" about honing their culinary skills, he said.

"It's amazing what they're doing. They should be really proud," said Rheanna Schaffer, a pastry sous chef at Walt Disney World, who mentors students in Wekiva's program.

Schaffer and another Disney chef were on campus Friday afternoon helping the team in its final practice. Each student had one dish he was chiefly responsible for but all helped out as needed.

"You're an hour in," Bates said, looking at a time.

By then, the chicken was marinating and the vegetables were cooking.

"You'll have to get the cake in the oven fast," Bates added.



Wekiva High School student chefs prepare food in the culinary arts kitchen at Wekiva High School in Apopka on Thursday, April 7, 2022. The students in culinary arts program are going to Houston, Texas, to compete in a NASA contest to come up for new food for astronauts. (Stephen M. Dowell/Orlando Sentinel)

Culinary competitions build enthusiasm for the academic program, just as school competitions in other fields do, said Bates, a former executive chef now in his eighth year at the Orange County high school.

And the culinary arts program, with more than 320 students enrolled, provides teenagers with academics coupled with hands-on skills, valuable even if they do not pursue a culinary career.

"The world of culinary arts is a catalyst, a laboratory if you will, for teaching life skills," Bates added.

His students, he said, must learn to be organized, hold to a schedule and deal with customers and co-workers.

The NASA contest required learning about the nutrition of pre-flight meals, writing a report and calculating whether they'd kept to the required calories, fat grams and sodium levels.

And the sodium levels proved tricky, Bates said, as they were very low.

The students settled on Indian dishes thinking the strong flavors would help make up for a lack of salt.

They tried and abandoned a fish dish. “That didn’t work,” Erick said with a shake of his head.

All three students said they signed up for a culinary class as an elective in ninth grade because they needed something to fill out their schedules.

“I like doing food,” Nicholas said, with a laugh. “A lot of kids think like that.”

But all got hooked, and Nicholas now wants to become a pastry chef.

A win at the NASA competition could mean a scholarship to a culinary school. But if they don’t win, they’ll still enjoy a tour of some NASA facilities and the chance to once again show what they can do in a kitchen.

“It’s been a really cool experience,” Bates said.

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