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Food Fare

Chefs' Challenge finalists chosen from more than 1,000 voters

By Lynn Schwartzberg
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On Sunday, Sept. 4, the Buskirk-Chumley Theater will be transformed into Bloomington Kitchen Stadium, where three chefs will prepare extraordinary dishes featuring a secret ingredient.

The fifth annual Bloomington Chefs' Challenge will feature three chefs selected by online voters. More than 1,000 votes were cast in the very competitive selection process.

Garnering the most votes this year is chef Erika Yochum, co-owner of Feast Bakery Cafe. She hopes to bring a bit of femininity to the competition as the first female chef ever to compete. Yochum has no formal training but believes she can use the freedom to her advantage. She doesn't feel constrained by the rules and traditions that formal training can create.

As for the secret ingredient, Yochum is hoping for peaches or squash but will be fine with anything. She will be assisted on stage by Anthony Gabriele, who has cooked with Yochum for six months.

Challenging Yochum will be Damian Esposito from the Indiana Memorial Union and Lake Hubbard from the Uptown Cafe.

Esposito has been at the IMU for three years during which time the menus have been updated and expanded.

Treating the Chefs' Challenge like a job interview is the strategy of Chef Esposito. He recalled a job interview where, after questions and answers, he was presented with a surprise basket of ingredients that he was asked to cook from.

His plan is to evaluate the pantry with his sous chef and create a plan. Esposito's assistant will be Michael Craig, pastry chef at the IMU. Craig also participated as sous chef two years ago at the Chefs' Challenge, an edge the team hopes to take advantage of.

Completing the trio of competing chefs is Lake Hubbard, chef at the Uptown Cafe. Son of Michael Cassady, Lake has spent his life in the kitchen. His hope is to wow the judges with creativity. He has been busy creating menu plans for any possible secret ingredient.

Hubbard described his style in the restaurant, challenging himself daily to create new and successful dishes. He explained that "Every day is a competition" and that he lives for this sort of event.

I had the chance to chat with two-time Chefs' Challenge winner Dave Tallent about the event and ask for some advice to pass along to the three new competitors. His advice is to work quickly and keep it

simple. He urges the chefs to “stick with dishes that you’re very comfortable cooking, the hour flies by.”

Tallent said his strategy was to make food that he would serve in his restaurant and to incorporate the secret ingredient in as many dishes as possible. Last year Tallent made a salad, soup and sandwich, and an entree. There were many different flavors and textures, all showcasing the secret ingredient, cheese.

So, the stage has been set. Three eager chefs are ready to dazzle the judges with their culinary expertise. The mystery ingredient will remain a mystery until the challenge begins on Sept. 4. Previous ingredients have been apples, sweet potatoes, corn and last year, cheese.

The only missing ingredient is you. The Chefs’ Challenge raises much needed funds for the Community Kitchen. Your ticket purchase not only admits you to an exciting evening of culinary theater and tasty bites from 10 local restaurants, it helps fund the Community Kitchen whose staff creates healthy and nutritious meals every day from an ever changing selection of ingredients.

Please plan to attend the Chefs’ Challenge to cheer on your favorite chef. It promises to be a night of culinary magic and great entertainment.

Chefs’ Challenge info

WHEN: Sept. 4. Doors open at 6 p.m., event starts at 7 p.m.

WHERE: Buskirk-Chumley Theater, 114 E. Kirkwood Ave.

TICKETS: \$25, available at Bloomingfoods, Community Kitchen and at the door. Special bistro seating information can be found at www.monroecommunitykitchen.com/events

MORE: The challenge is a fundraiser for Community Kitchen of Monroe County



Erika Yochum



Damian Esposito



Lake Hubbard

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