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 Suzanna Costanza, right, joins Alejandra Galicia, Chloe Russell and Emily Cole, members of The Chili Chicks team from St. Joseph High School, as they prepare ingredients Friday during the Chili Cook-Off at Lake Michigan College. They placed first in the tablescap portion.

One zesty food fight

High school students compete for top honors in Chili Cook-Off

By LOUISE WREGE
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BENTON TOWNSHIP — Ingredients were flying Friday as more than 130 high school students from five schools competed in the eighth annual Chili Cook-Off at the Mendel Center at Lake Michigan College in Benton Township.

Students from St. Joseph and Benton Harbor high schools took home some of the event's biggest prizes.

The Chili Chicks from St. Joseph High School placed first in tablescap, or overall look of the table.

They put white chili in a mug and surrounded it with cornbread "cookies" to make a milk and cookies scene, said junior Emily Cole.

Freshman Chloe Russell said they made the "cookies" by pan frying cornbread into patties and cooling them before cutting them with Christmas-themed cookie cutters. Other students on the team were Suzanna Costanza and Alejandra Galicia.

The Benton Harbor High School team, Christmas Wonderland, placed second in tablescap.

Third place in tablescap went to the Soup-A-Stars from Branch Area Careers Center in Coldwater. The Backyard BBQers from St. Joseph High School placed fourth and Chili from the Nilly from Niles High School placed fifth.

Chili winners

The Fantastic Four from St. Joseph High School won first place in the chili category. Team members were Devin Kavanaugh, Sarah Leichter, Maylee Von Behren and Mandy Jones.

Second place went to the Soup-A-Stars. Third and fourth places went to the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Zoo York, both from Kalamazoo RESA. Fifth place was won by Koel's Chili from Niles High School.

Placing first in the portfolio contest was Neil Bailey from Kalamazoo RESA. The rest of the winners, all from St. Joseph High School, were Cira Vance in second, Danielle Cristobal in third, Hannah Mix in fourth and Gabi Scaccia in fifth.

Competition hones skills

Chris Woodruff, chair of the college's Hospitality Management Faculty and program, said competitions between schools give students a chance to meet culinary students from other schools.

"It gives them the opportunity to use what they've been learning in class in a practical setting," he said.



The cooking team from Benton Harbor High School competes Friday during the Chili Cook-Off at the Mendel Center at Lake Michigan College. The team placed second in the tablescap portion.



Joshua Wetzel, center, with St. Joseph High School's The Red Hot Chili Peppers, races against the clock during Friday's Chili Cook-Off at Lake Michigan College.

"It teaches them how the real world, the real industry is — pacing, time, things like that."

He said 34 teams had one hour to cook and present their chili along with corn bread.

While they were cooking, judges looked at the students' table organization, knife skills and how they worked together as a team, said Karen Rooker, culinary instructor at St. Joseph High School.

"It's a very competitive thing," she said. "It takes us to a different level, this competition."

She said the students compete against each other in class, but they are challenged more when they compete against different schools.

"They get to see different ideas in the way people are doing their tablescapes and the different vessels they are using for display," she said.

The college's culinary arts instructor, Luis Amado, said chefs have to be more than just good cooks.

"As we go around to judge them, you can tell how they interact, and for me that's important," he said. "That tells me whether or not they're going to be good, hospitable people, which is a very necessary trait to be in this business."

He said chefs need to be inviting so people are willing to try their recipes. And, he said chefs need to be able to accept criticism if a dish needs to be modified.

Woodruff said cooking at the college may inspire the students to make cooking their career.

"It can get them excited about college," he said. "Maybe they haven't even thought about it, yet. It's like, 'This is fun, I can do this. I may want to do this for a career.'"

Thirteen of the 77 students in Benton Harbor High School's Culinary Arts and Hospitality Services CTE program were cooking at the competition, said instructor Jennifer Gunter.

She said cooking at an event is nothing new for her students.

"We signed up with the (Benton Harbor) school district to cater most of the school events," she said.

One of the biggest events so far was when her students fed more than 400 parents, students and teachers a Thanksgiving dinner Nov. 22 at the high school. She said her students partnered with students from the 21st Century after-school program for the event.

"That turned out really well," she said.

She said her students again join with the 21st Century program to put on a Christmas dinner Dec. 15.

She said her program is required to cater two events a year.

"But we do about 10 a semester," she said. Gunter said the experience helps prepare her students for real jobs if they decide to go into the hospitality business.

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