

Culinary students sizzle in cook-offs

Fennel and grapefruit prove winners for chefs in training

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Imagine being given three hours to create a dish that must be presented to two judges with highly trained palates and not knowing what the secret ingredient is. That's exactly what faced 17-year-old Shari Taylor at the Regional Skills Canada competition for culinary arts recently.

The event was held in the home economics lab at a Campbell River high school, and even though Shari is accustomed to using the professional kitchen at Brooks Secondary School as a dual-credit culinary arts student, she prepared for the difference by spending hours practicing her dishes and plating skills in the school's home economics lab.



DUAL-CREDIT MEDAL DUO: Brooks Secondary School and Vancouver Island University dual-credit culinary arts students Michelle Botelho [left] and Shari Taylor each performed well under pressure in culinary competitions.

Cheered on by her mom, who had been in the culinary arts training program two years ago, Shari was unfazed when she heard the secret ingredient: fennel. She said she felt calm at the beginning, writing out a menu within two minutes. "I felt like I was in a movie. I tuned out all the other competitors at first and focused on my dishes and being clean with my prep."

Shari prepared an appetizer of ratatouille in a fennel bowl, a main dish of salmon with a fennel sauce, and three vegetable dishes, one more than the requirement.

Being one of the last to be judged, Shari became worried. When the winners were announced, Shari picked up the gold medal. "I texted Xavier [Bauby, instructor for the culinary arts dual-credit program through Brooks and Vancouver Island University] right away."

Bauby is proud of his student. "I picked her because she was the best fit for that competition. She stands out."

Shari plans to further her culinary training when she attends the second year of the diploma program at VIU in Nanaimo. "I'd like to get my red seal, but I would love to get a medical degree. Cooking will be my backup to pay for my schooling."

Bauby accompanied another student to the BC Skills competition in Abbotsford recently. Michelle Botelho, who had previously won a regional competition, earned the right to represent the North Island and Powell River.

Braced to prepare four hors d'oeuvres, two desserts and a sauce, she had no idea of the secret ingredient ahead of time. "All the way to Abbotsford, we were guessing at what it was going to be,"

Michelle said. "We assumed it would be meat. We joked that it would be crocodile or kangaroo."

"When grapefruit was announced as the secret ingredient, you should have seen her face," said Bauby.

Not understanding that she could have used the ingredient just as a garnish, Michelle chose to highlight it. "I put it everywhere. I was terrified, and it was like there were ghosts in my kitchen. I know I had my oven turned on but when I was ready to make my cake, it was turned off. Luckily, my next-door competitor let me use his oven."

Then Michelle put her finished cake on top of the stove. "I must have left the element on; I burned the cakes."

Wondering what she could do, Michelle was determined not to quit. Without much time left, she created a pound cake compote she had never made before and salvaged the cake. "I was so stressed. I had to think differently than everything I had practiced. I was thrilled to take home the silver medal."

Bauby emphasized the high value of the second-place finish. "It was a tight race of points. Michelle does so well under pressure."