

A Classic Opportunity

ACF Culinary Regional Team USA brings passion, dedication and commitment to its quest for success at the American Culinary Classic.

By Kay Orde



ACF Culinary Regional Team USA members on their way to the American Culinary Classic are: back row, left to right, Craig Peterson; Joseph Leonardi; Timothy Prefontaine, CSC; Jill Bosich, CEC, CCE, AAC, team manager; and front row, left to right, Scott Fetty; Michael Matarazzo, team captain; Mellisa Root, team pastry chef.

This month, a young culinary team is realizing a dream: the opportunity to represent its country at the American Culinary Classic, one of the most important international culinary competitions in the world. The team will compete in the Classic at the National Restaurant Association (NRA) Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show® Sunday, May 20, and Tuesday, May 22, at McCormick Place, Chicago.

The competition is formidable. In addition to the United States, teams from the Bahamas, Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey and Wales will vie to be named “best in the world.”

The American Culinary Federation, Inc. (ACF) Culinary Regional Team USA—Scott Fetty, Joseph Leonardi, Michael Matarazzo, Mellisa Root, Craig Peterson and Timothy Prefontaine, CSC—might be young, but they possess something to position them as serious players at the Classic, according to team coach Jill Bosich, CEC, CCE, AAC. “Their degree of commitment and the desire to do well is nothing other than totally inspirational to me,” Bosich says. “They have blown me away with their dedication and the desire to represent ACF and American cuisine with the highest degree of professionalism and pride.”

Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, ACF Culinary Team USA manager and a member of the national team, is pleased to see such commitment from the regional team. It proves, he says, that a long-range plan to have regional team members “in the wings” to aspire to the national team after 2008 is working. “The regional team is a training team for the national team, and

they are getting more involved, taking on the role of representing ACF and the United States at the Culinary Classic," Leonard says.

"Experience is a valuable tool in the grooming and training of future team members, and exposure will create that experience. It also creates a desire to look toward the next level, and say, 'Hey, I want to be here next time. I want to be in the kitchen cooking for my country and my fellow ACF members and the profession I love.'"

A common goal

Normally, ACF Culinary National Team USA would represent the United States at the Classic. However, the national team is focused on the 2008 International Culinary Exhibition (IKA) in Erfurt, Germany, and has chosen to forego other competitions so that team members can prepare for the IKA. "With 18 months to go, we are on a path to try to be the best in 2008, and to do this, a different approach and thinking was needed," Leonard says. "It was a tough decision, as we would have loved to defend our Classic championship title from 2003.

"But, more importantly, we needed to give other chefs a chance to compete in this arena, both for the experience and to build desire in them so that they will say, 'I love this. It's what being on ACF Culinary Team USA is all about.'"

Bosich says the regional team appreciates the opportunity to compete at the Classic, and is working to make sure that they are prepared to meet the challenge. "Although they don't have the international culinary experience as a group, they realize that to have this opportunity

to compete on this level is a gracious invitation extended to them, and they accept it with all seriousness and honor," she says. "To be on this team is a privilege, but with this opportunity comes expectations. So, we have to work a little tighter, a little sharper, and recognize that our work, skills and actions need to be at the highest level because of what we represent"

Team in training

If a commitment to training is any indication, team members are doing their best to be ready for the Classic. "We have had about four months to prepare a group of chefs that have never competed as a team in an international competition," Bosich says. "We don't even call them practices any more, because, given the short amount of time before the Classic, the chefs use their time at home to do their research and development. When we arrive at a session, it's total concentration on the refinement and polish that needs to be worked into the dishes."

Bosich has the right credentials to coach this young team, having competed at the

2000 IKA in Erfurt as a member of the regional team. She says her experience cooking and competing internationally is invaluable to the team as she teaches them what it takes to truly be at their best.

"Being on the team is such an immersion in food and cuisine. It teaches you to work smarter, think fast, and realize that, although you are an individual, to win and succeed you have to put self aside and work together to achieve a common goal," Bosich says. "The beauty of this group of chefs is they have truly set self aside and have a great working rapport. They respect each other and believe in one another."

Skill set

Leonard says it isn't accidental that this team of chefs is capable of competing at the Classic. During tryouts at the 2006 NRA Show, judges paid special attention to skills and attitudes. "We were looking for the same qualities we sought in national team members, but with even more focus on the potential talent and skills that could be

ACF Culinary Regional Team USA members competing in the American Culinary Classic are:

Scott Fetty, Pennsylvania Culinary Institute, Pittsburgh, ACF Pittsburgh Chapter

Joseph Leonardi, Johnson & Wales University, Providence, R.I., ACF Rhode Island Chapter

Michael Matarazzo, team captain, Westchester Country Club, Rye, N.Y., ACF National Chapter

Craig Peterson, Hallbrook Country Club, Leawood, Kan., ACF Greater Kansas City Chefs Association

Timothy Prefontaine, CSC, River Oaks Country Club, Houston, ACF Chapter of Northern New Hampshire

Mellisa Root, River Oaks Country Club, Houston, Texas Chefs Association

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—Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC

developed over the years to be something really special,” Leonard says. “And, most of all, we were looking for those character attributes that reflected a passion to learn and to be the best, along with a work ethic that meant a chef would do whatever it took to be a successful team player.”

Bosich reminds her team that although there are many skills members of ACF Culinary Team USA need to possess, they can't forget the basics of what's expected of any competitor in any competition. “I'm often inspired by the chefs and students in ACF who just put themselves out there and on the line to compete in front of their peers,” she says. “That, in itself, is such a huge commitment. So, as a team, we often remind ourselves that our skills in the kitchen extend to the way we conduct ourselves personally and professionally.”

Four regional-team members—Christopher Desens, CEC, Drew Garms, Jennifer Kopp, CPC, and Daryl Shular—will be in Chicago to assist and support the competing team. Bosich says the experience will start preparing them, too, to acquire the polish and refinement necessary to compete successfully at the 2008 IKA.

“Essentially, working with all these chefs is a crash course in international culinary competition preparation, and my role has been to bring their work up to a high level in a short amount of time,” Bosich says.

“And, too, with the noncompeting regional chefs, this experience will be another exposure to get them ready for future international competitions.”

Meeting the challenge

So, can this young team convince Classic judges that they are serious players? Bosich says the judges will be looking for polish, confidence, great skills and the fluidity that comes from a group that works together with a great sense of purpose.

“That's one of the things I've emphasized with this group of chefs over and over,” she says. “They may not have the experience of competing together internationally, but if they just stick to their programs as planned, they will be as convincing as any other team of seasoned competitors. Although there are many characteristics judges look for in both the hot-food and cold-food programs, overall, those teams that are successful just bring a combination of skills and traits that solidify them as ready to do what they've been training to do.”

She says the biggest challenge the team faces is that they don't know what to expect. “But, as much as this is a new experience for them, it's almost okay that it is, because they have no barometers to compare themselves with, and, thus, are totally focused on succeeding,” she says. “If they execute their work as planned, they have a great chance of doing very well. Although they are a bit ‘green’ as far as experience goes, they truly make up for it in heart and determination. I think if they can hold on to that as their base, they will do fantastically.”

Leonard emphasizes the value of regional team members to the overall ACF Culinary Team USA, and says the Classic will be a testing ground for them. “This is a time to see how much patience they possess, and how much of a team player a chef really is on the regional level,” he says. “They need to be humble, have their egos in check and be ready to help at any time. And, they must have that passion to reach the next level, drive themselves to become better, and give future national teams experienced cooks who are ready to step up to the plate.

“They are every bit a part of us and ACF Culinary Team USA. Whatever the outcome at the Classic, they are colleagues and team alumni, period.”

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