
Practicing for Perfection

Much more than cooking takes place when ACF Culinary Team USA gathers to practice: R&D and the building of a team culture play a big part.

By Kay Orde



Brad Barnes

Jamie Keating, CCC, puts the finishing touches on finger foods for the cold-food display at the 2006 Culinary World Cup in Luxembourg.

It was curiosity that led ACF Culinary Team USA to one of the most successful items on its gold medal-winning hot-food menu at the 2004 International Culinary Exhibition (IKA) in Erfurt, Germany. One day during the months that led up to the competition, team manager/captain Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, was eating at a Peruvian casual-dining restaurant. “I was curious, and ordered the dish they called stuffed mashed potato, and here was this nicely browned potato-shaped concoction on my plate,” he says. “It was mashed potato that had been fried, and when I placed a fork inside, out came a flavorful pork stew.”

The dish was destined to affect one of the dishes in the Pennsylvania Dutch-influenced hot-food menu the team was perfecting for the IKA. The dumplings that came out of practice sessions were good, Leonard says, but they didn’t have the “wow” factor the team was looking for. “So, I remembered the potato, and said, let’s try putting our venison braise inside the dumpling. It was one of the judges’ favorite items.”

The dish’s birth might seem serendipitous to the casual observer, but Leonard

and the team know it was much more than that. A willingness to try a variety of dishes in diverse venues is part of an intense program of preparation for an international culinary competition deemed the most challenging in the world. In that casual Peruvian restaurant, Leonard was, in fact, conducting research and development (R&D). “It was the payoff for our ongoing discussion on doing a signature starch on the menu,” he says. “Taking the dumpling and stuffing it with a braised meat was a great concept.”

“Practice” by any other name

Say, “team practice session,” and it’s easy to conjure up a picture of half a dozen chefs cooking in the kitchen at the Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y., where Leonard is executive chef. But as Leonard points out, the practice schedule encompasses much more than that. “First, there are many meetings where we share ideas,” he says. “We review the good and the bad from the past years, going back as far as 2000. We also look at images from the top culinary teams in the international arena so that we can compare their styles and philosophy with ours.”



Brad Barnes

Patricia Nash, ACF Culinary Team USA pastry chef, and Darrin Aoyama, CEPC, pastry coach for the 2006 Culinary World Cup, assemble the stands for the petit-four display: pastillage popcorn boxes filled with white-chocolate popcorn, and a strip of pastillage "tickets" that rest on top.

of the overall practice schedule. "These are the times when each team member, concentrating on one particular aspect of the whole, gets to the place where it's possible to bring quality work to the table," Leonard says.

Practice payoff

Leonard is confident that all the work will pay dividends when, in about a year, the team has a solid program that can be practiced, redefined and adjusted. "And after feedback and much study, we should be in good shape to progress and bring our months of hard work to the international stage," he says. "In fact, we will peak about 10 months before that, and through intensive practice, try to be at a confident, calm place two months out."

Confidence and calm is a tall order at the IKA, even for a team as experienced as ACF Culinary Team USA. But there's practice for that aspect of the process, too. The team is constantly working on ways to become a cohesive whole. "Most definitely, motivation, being a team and performing under pressure is all part of the training as we travel the road to Erfurt," Leonard says. And team members have a novel way of offering support to one another. Quotes, such as this one, are circulated via e-mail as reminders of the ultimate goal: "True

greatness happens when it is all on the line. People expect it, they expect you to perform, and they expect you to fulfill your potential and, most of all, to do it when it counts and to win when you have to. Will we show true greatness as chefs, or not?"

Leonard says such efforts to cultivate a positive attitude contribute toward the kind of culture the team is building. "It's a culture that believes in our ability, and believes that together we will succeed," he says.

A test of the team's belief in itself was evident during the 2004 IKA, when, with two silvers and one gold medal to its credit, "many thought we were down for the count," Leonard says. "But true character lies in what you do when all is not so grand. Being one of only four teams to garner a gold in the hot kitchen, win the hot championship and finish third overall was, plain and simple, a culture of believing in each other and not accepting that we were out of the race."

Then, team members broaden their exposure by dining at top restaurants, where they sample dishes that showcase the latest ideas coming out of the food industry. They take classes and seminars that encourage thinking out-of-the-box, as well as attend sessions that start the team on a path of self-examination. "And after much talk, sharing of ideas, eating and discussing food, we move to the development stage of our hot and cold programs," Leonard says.

It takes many practice sessions—the majority of which are held at Westchester Country Club, the team's headquarters—for the team to fully exploit all this valuable learning. Then there are assignments that each chef practices at his or her home property, an extremely important part

ACF Culinary Team USA
Thanks Its Generous Sponsors
 Chef Revival
 Club Managers Association of America
 Fortessa
 Kraft Foods Global
 McCormick & Co., Inc.
 Tyson Foods, Inc.
 Uncle Ben's
 Unilever Foodsolutions
 Westchester Country Club

The R&D difference

So, let's return to Leonard, eating in that Peruvian restaurant. Does R&D really help the team craft a winning menu? "R&D is essential," Leonard says. "Just as companies spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on R&D to develop products and items that keep them on top, the team is no different. The R&D process helps us think differently, helps us see what other top chefs and restaurants are doing."

"Our profession has so much talent, so many new concepts, that one chef, no matter how great, cannot do it all. Read about every top restaurant chef, every star chef, and see where their inspiration has come from. Read about how they taste, eat, explore and learn to make themselves better at their craft. Everyone has a story to tell in that regard, and they all keep learning."

But the team's R&D is more than exploring chefs' most innovative dishes, and it goes beyond sampling the best of the best in the culinary world. "It entails all of us researching together and alone," Leonard says. "It entails accessing the Internet, getting publications from outside the United States and reading books that may bring an idea to life." Leonard cites as an example a fish dish that the team developed for the Salon Culinaire Mondial 2005 in Basel, Switzerland, after studying the cuisine of legendary chef Alain Ducasse and the many concepts combining fish with beans. "We adapted his philosophy and some of his concepts, and developed a dish that won gold," Leonard says.

ACF Culinary Team USA joins many of the top national teams that travel to



Brad Barnes

other countries to see what new cuisine developments can be incorporated into their programs. But Leonard stresses that the team explores cuisine concepts and ideas rather than a particular country's cuisine. The goal is to find a concept that they can enhance and build into the team's food and philosophy. "We are looking for the 'wow' factor," Leonard says. "However, our focus remains American food, even though that food might incorporate an influence from another culture. Or, perhaps the food will come out of American classics, such as when we did she-crab soup, king-crab terrine and crispy crab fingers, all true American dishes."

An example of R&D at work occurred in 1988, when the championship U.S. team

ACF Culinary Team USA practices cooking and so much more as they travel the road to the 2008 IKA in Erfurt. Team members are, left to right, Jamie Keating, CCC; Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, team manager; Richard Rosendale, CC, team captain; Patricia Nash; Joachim Buchner, CMC; and Daniel Scannell, CMC.

developed a dish after dining at a top New York restaurant. One of the team members chose squab, and the dish the team created as a result helped propel it to a gold medal in hot food at the IKA. "They took the ball and ran, taking the dish to a new level that showed such skill, creativity and flavor," Leonard says. "And it was all done in the toughest of kitchen situations—the IKA."