

Winning Combination

Age, energy and experience equal an ACF Culinary Team USA preparing to take on the world.

By Kay Orde

When ACF Culinary Team USA's national team headed for Luxembourg in November, the purpose of the trip was clear: to compete in the 2000 Culinary World Cup against their international peers. But the team was doing much more than that. Team members were

Sauce is added to an entrée by Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, ACF Culinary Team USA manager and national team member, at the Culinary World Cup in Luxembourg.



Brad Barnes

teaching the tricks of the trade, in this case, the nuances that go into competing successfully in the international culinary competition arena, to six members of ACF Culinary Team USA's regional team.

Five regional-team members assisted and one member was the national-team alternate at the competition. They were part of the national team's success in bringing home gold medals in both cold food and hot food, and placing fifth overall among 25 nations. And that, says ACF Culinary Team USA manager Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, is how it should be.

"Regional team members will be the future," says Leonard. "They bring in new blood—people who think a little differently. I was proud of the teamwork all members exhibited. Sometimes, when you have a lot of talent in the kitchen, egos get in the way, but they supported one another and really worked together."

Gauging the competition

Working as a team is important on the international competition scene, where the U.S. team goes up against such traditional champions as Singapore, Canada and

Switzerland. But in Luxembourg, the team noticed some new players. "The Nordic countries are becoming a force to be dealt with," Leonard says. "They have come a long way. But it's good to see other countries come to the table and make the competition even more challenging."

The emergence of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden at the 2006 Culinary World Cup is just one way in which today's international competition differs from that Leonard experienced as an apprentice on his first culinary Olympic team in 1984. But much has changed in others areas of the competition, he says, even in the years since he took over as team manager in 1998.

One of the biggest changes is in styles of food and display tables. Today's displays have a clean, modern look and offer elegant, streamlined presentations. There is also an increased interest in nutrition. "One thing we noticed, coming from the U.S. point of view, was portion size," Leonard says. "Plates were a lot more nutritionally balanced, and we saw how we could better balance protein with starch, vegetables and salads, and still present excellent food."

ACF Culinary Team USA in Luxembourg

National Team

Joachim Buchner, CMC

Jamie Keating, CCC

Patrica Nash

Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC

Joseph Leonardi, alternate

Richard Rosendale, CC

Daniel Scannell, CMC

Regional Team

Christopher Desens, CEC

Scott Fetty

Michael Matarazzo

Craig Peterson

Daryl Shular, CCC

"We saw food that was progressive, from a nutritional point of view, and still good. And this is the focus of competition—to learn and advance your craft. At the end, you want to be able to walk away and say, 'I can take this back, and use it in my restaurant!'"

The national team went to Luxembourg as world champions in hot food, an honor earned at the 2004 International Culinary Exhibition (IKA), more commonly known as the "culinary Olympics," in Erfurt, Germany. That distinction poses challenges. "You go with the best of intentions, but it gets harder as your reputation grows," says Leonard, "There is pressure on us to perform at a certain level!"

Team spirit

Performing at that level is helped by having experienced team members return to the

national team. Four out of the present six team members were on the 2004 team, and two of them, Daniel Scannell, CMC, and Leonard, were on the 2000 team.

"This is the first time in a long time that we've had that kind of consistency," Leonard says. He notes that team member Jamie Keating, CCC, went the classic preparation route: the 2000 youth team, 2004 regional team and now, 2008 national team. "So we are finally getting some progression—young people who do student, regional and then national—and there's an advantage in having those with much experience and those with some experience working together. It's a huge benefit!"

As with most benefits, though, there's a caveat. In this case, with a mix of younger and older team members, Leonard says the older members have to be aware that younger members come to the competition arena with an enormous hunger. "They have tons of energy and are very hungry," he says. "That means older members have to be hungry, too!"

The good news is that the team blends experience and excitement, young and old in such a way that Leonard can already see the synergy that's so vital to a team that will compete successfully. "The diversity of the team makes it a good, strong team," he says. "And we have a good balance of age, energy and experience."

Being hungry and having the time to feed that hunger might be a privilege afforded only to the young. Leonard points to increasing career and family responsibilities as team members mature. Their younger counterparts, with fewer ties, can more easily focus on the team.



"Tasting of Tropical Flavors and Chocolate," ACF Culinary Team USA's pastry course, was served on these plates being prepared by team pastry chef Patricia Nash.

All team members, and especially those who are team veterans, know that success doesn't come without a few sacrifices. Leonard says they saw challenges ahead of them as the team was preparing for Luxembourg, when they found it difficult to schedule practices. "As we go forward, we have to make time to practice if we are to succeed," he says.

Another challenge as the team prepares to compete in Erfurt at the 2008 IKA is developing winning menus. Leonard says this is the time to look further from home and see what other countries are doing. "But there's a danger in being too progressive and stepping over the line," he says. "We have to find that balance of bringing new things to the table without going over that line."

The journey begins

"We're on a 20-month journey to a championship," Leonard says.

There is much work to be done between now and the IKA. Leonard sees many brainstorming sessions, with team members questioning, "Who are we? What have we done? What are other teams doing? What can we draw on?" he says. "We'll have good conversations, and analyze past and present."

And the team will also eat food prepared by others, sometimes in other countries. Such research and development trips, maybe to a Nordic country, are essential, Leonard says, so that the U.S. team can see what the rest of the culinary world is doing. "We'll start developing a foundation of what we'll create in Erfurt."

Ten months out from the competition, cold and hot food will be planned, and the team will spend the intervening months perfecting the menus. They will bring in some of the best chefs, cook for them and listen to what they say. "These will be chefs who know and love food, and will give us ideas," Leonard says. "So we'll spend time planning, researching, developing and gathering input."

He says the team is fortunate to have the support of John Kinsella, CMC, CCE, AAC, ACF national president, and Joe Aiello, CEC, AAC, ACF national treasurer. Aiello went to Luxembourg as an observer, and lent a valuable hand by driving the truck used to transport food and equipment. "They both support and

believe in the team," Leonard says. "And having people from home with you makes all the difference. It meant a lot to us to have that support."

Representing your country

Leonard says the 25 countries that competed in Luxembourg might be going up against one another, but they all have the same goal. "We all want to do well, but the pride is in cooking your country's food and representing your country," he says. "It goes way beyond the pride of winning gold or silver. Because, at the end of the day, we're all representing something we believe in—our food and our country."

Members of the regional team traveled to Luxembourg to work with national team members and experience some of that commitment firsthand. "They have the experience and see the hot kitchen in motion, but they also feel the excitement and see the crowds," Leonard says.

"They all know there will be opportunities available on future national teams," he adds. "And they can work their way up."

He advises past team members to stay involved to help new teams learn that competition is more than winning medals. "The last thing you want to do is walk away and have nothing to do with the team that follows," Leonard says. "Once you are part of the team, it stays with you. It should be important to you that future teams do well. With that support, they'll have a commitment to carry on the torch."

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Richard Rosendale, CC, ACF Culinary Team USA captain, begins to prepare the tenderloin that was part of Team USA's "Trilogy of American Beef."