



40th Annual Culinary Arts Competition Heats Up at Fort Lee

By J.D. Leipold — Army News Service

The Joint Culinary Center of Excellence at Fort Lee, Virginia, hosted the 40th Military Culinary Arts Competitive Training Event last week.

The competition, which ran March 7-12, pitted against each other individuals and teams from the five U.S. service branches as well as participants from the United Kingdom, France and Germany.

Participants competed in categories such as best team buffet table, cold food table, most artistic exhibit, contemporary cooking and pastry, nutritional hot food challenge, and field cooking competition. They also competed for titles like Senior Chef of the Year, Student Chef of the Year and Army enlisted Aide of the Year.

During the competition, 281 military chefs submitted 588 entries, and earned 62 gold, 179 silver and 191 bronze medals. Judging was provided by an international group of 12 chefs from the American Culinary Federation, which sets the bar for the standard of excellence for chefs. Entrants were judged on presentation, food safety, kitchen cleanliness, food flavor and color.

While each service has its individual credentialing or apprenticeship programs, competitors also have the opportunity to receive continuing education hours, which are validated by the American Culinary Federation.

Staff Sgt. Gabriel Earle headed up the Fort Gordon, Georgia, team of 10 Soldiers who had to compete for

the opportunity to participate in the 40th competition. In the Army now for ten years, he's actually been a chef for 15, having gone to culinary school at Johnson-Wales University. Before the competition, he put the Soldiers on his team through a few months of basic culinary training as well as the art of fine dining.

Earle said taking care of Soldiers is a No. 1 priority for military chefs. But competitions like the one at Fort Lee let him show his Soldiers that there is more available to them — there are opportunities to excel.

"I enjoy cooking for the Army because we're fueling the force — when we're in the field, the most important element to keep in mind is keeping the Soldiers fed," he said. "I also like being able to train Soldiers to compete and showing them the different opportunities to move up — like cooking for the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the Pentagon or even the White House."

Earle is halfway through his executive chef certification with the American Culinary Federation. He is also studying to be a certified dietician, a profession he hopes to pick up following retirement from the Army.

As a senior noncommissioned officer, Earle is more of a kitchen manager than a line cook, but compliments on the meals his Soldiers turn out to other Soldiers is well received, he said.

"It makes me proud of my Soldiers; that I've trained



Pfc. Nichapa Srisaringkam is critiqued by American Culinary Federation judge Gunther Heiland as teammates look on. (U.S. Army photo by J.D. Leipold)

them well and that they take pride in the food they put out to their fellow Soldiers,” he said.

With 32 years as a culinary educator and 40 years as a chef, ACF member Kevin Gawronski pulled his second tour as a judge at the competition and came away amazed at the plates of fare set before him.

“Remarkable,” he said. “What impresses me most is that they’re more involved with traditional-style Army cooking, and now they just jump over and put out what we call restaurant-style food ... and they’re doing an impressively good job at it ... especially because so many of them are first-time contestants.

“To be here you have to have a passion for food, the willingness to learn and put yourself out there,” Gawronski said. “To actually come out and compete for the first time, it’s tough, but you do it, and learn so much about yourself, timing, products and building on your skills.”

Staff Sgt. Scott Stormer, who led the Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia, team of nine, has three cooks from the Air Force and six from the Army. He said he’s pretty proud of the skill of the service members on his team — and their standing in the competition.

“We have a Soldier who hasn’t even been in the Army for a year, and she’s already grabbed a gold medal,” he said. “She’s very talented.”

With 18 years on active-duty and eight years in the National Guard, Stormer said he knew he wanted to join the Army out of high school.

“I figure everybody has to eat, so that’s a guaranteed job later down the line. I’ve been doing culinary art schools ever since,” he said. “And I’m always building on what I’ve learned.”

Part of building on what he’s learned, Stormer said, is competing at events such as the 40th Military Culinary Arts Competitive Training Event. Getting recognized at the event, he said, goes a long way in preparing military cooks for their future outside the Army.

“The ACF certificates are really important for resumes ... applying for jobs,” he said. “Just imagine how many chefs and cooks in the military and outside have never competed — there’re a lot. There’s just a small percentage who have an American Culinary Federation medal or certificate — and that can go a long way.”

Former Navy submariner and now Army Sgt. Patrick Burghardt has not only been in the stifled galleys of the undersea world, but in Army kitchens as well. He said he’s seen how hard it is to serve 400-500 people per meal on a daily basis. At the competition, he didn’t face the challenge of cooking for an entire submarine crew — but he was afforded the opportunity to prepare something unique enough to earn him a medal.

“You can take food and create something that has never been seen before,” he said. “I did a lobster dish that I created on my own — it’s like a stir fry. I worked it, changed it, threw stuff out, and brought new elements in. The first time I did it, I got a gold. This time I got a silver. I made a few mistakes, but I learned.”

Staff Sgt. Matthew Flemister served as a chef for 12 years before joining the Army at 29. He joined up to continue his trade, and loves what he does — even if it’s mostly institutional cooking. He headed up a small team of five Soldiers from Fort Huachuca, Arizona. This is Flemister’s eighth competition.

“The things I’ve had a chance to do in the Army have just been phenomenal,” he said. “Events like this you never see in the civilian sector, so bringing my team here is a real treat.

“I’ve had the honor of twice making the U.S. Army Culinary Arts Team and competing twice in Germany where I won a gold and a silver medal — I couldn’t be happier to have the ability to showcase my talent,” he said.

Flemister says certification is a great steppingstone for young chefs. During the competition, for instance, he was going to take the exam to earn a certificate as a personal certified executive chef.

“I’m a big fan of certification because anybody can say, ‘I’m a chef,’ but certification proves you’ve met a certain standard and that you know what you’re doing, what you’re talking about and can back up what you say — it’s a way to weed out a home cook from a professional cook.”

Flemister won Armed Forces Masters Chef of the Year for 2015.

More than 62 gold medals, 179 silver medals and 191 bronze medals were presented in front of an audience of hundreds at the awards ceremony for the 40th Military Culinary Arts Competitive Training Event. The awardees were:

- Installation of the Year: Joint Team Hawaii
- Armed Forces Senior Chef of the Year: Sgt. Samantha Poe, Fort Myer, Washington D.C.
- Armed Forces Masters Chef of the Year: Staff Sgt. Matthew Flemister, Fort Huachuca, Ariz.
- Armed Forces Junior Chef of the Year: Spc. Symone Harden, Hawaii
- Army Enlisted Aide of the Year: Staff Sgt. Marc Susa, Fort McNair, Washington D.C.
- International Team of the Year: United States
- Student Team Skills Competition: Joint Team Hawaii
- Field Cooking Competition: U.S. Navy, Naval Supply Systems Command, Mechanicsburg Pa.
- Nutritional Hot Food Challenge: Master Sgt. Adriana Ybarra and Sgt. Daniel Parks, Joint Team Hawaii
- Best in Class – (Cat P, Contemporary Pastry Professional): Tie between Spc. Adreas Bell, Fort Huachuca, Ariz. and Master Sgt. Esnault Oliver, French National Team
- Best in Class – (Cat P, Contemporary Pastry Student): Tie between Petty Officer 3rd Class Stephan Trimble, U.S. Navy and Spc. Sandra Quinones, Joint Base Lewis McChord.
- Best in Class — Contemporary Cooking Professional: Petty Officer 2nd Class Joseph Hale, U.S. Coast Guard
- Best in Class — Contemporary Cooking Student: Pfc. Catherine Whitaker, Joint Base Langley Eustis, Va.
- Best Exhibit in Show (Cat A, Cold Platter): Staff Sgt. Justin Gonzalez, Fort Lee, Va.
- Best Exhibit in Show (Cat B, Cold Appetizers): Sgt. Daniel Parks, Joint Team Hawaii
- Best Exhibit in Show (Cat. C, Patisserie/Confectionery): Petty Officer 2nd Class Aaron Quiambao, Joint Team Hawaii
- Best Exhibit in Show (Cat. D, Showpiece): Spc. Jessica Romero, Fort Carson, Colo.
- Most Artistic Exhibit in Show: Spc. Jessica Romero, Fort Carson, Colo.
- Judges Special Award (Cold Food Table): Team Hawaii ■



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