

Spicing it up

Residents get a 'taste' of the competition in this *Iron Chef America* spinoff

BY GRACE ZARNAS-HOYER

With the increasing popularity of the Food Network, one can find shows on celebrity chefs, recipe ideas for that perfect party, bizarre foods of the world and, most importantly, knowledge of where our food comes from. The trend for food knowledge just keeps growing and now has many older adults who reside at senior living communities viewing food as a source of entertainment, comfort and camaraderie—all while enjoying unique flavors and fresh, exciting menu items.

Recently, a "Chefs' Challenge" event at Peter Becker Community (PBC), a continuing care retirement community (CCRC) offering a range of services from residential living to nursing care in Harleysville, Penn., inspired residents to create a three-course meal. According to PBC President and CEO Carol Berster, the goal is to find new and unique ways to please residents. "Things have obviously changed since I started working in this industry back in 1976. My goal is to create a place where people can live differently. It's wonderful how through these endeavors, you see people come to life and have fun with food," says Berster.

In 2009, the Chefs' Challenge was created in collaboration with PBC dining services' partner, Cura Hospitality. "This idea came to us when the American Association of Homes & Services for the Aging (now LeadingAge) held its annual meeting in Philadelphia a few years ago and had a Chefs' Challenge among some of the dining services management companies that serve its members. Since Cura won the event, it got me thinking that we could do this at Peter Becker," says Berster.

Berster and her team decided to hold the Chefs' Challenge during PBC's annual flower show, which attracts 8,000 people from Harleysville and Philadelphia-area



Team Tempura chefs Jennifer Benner, Edward Varon and resident "guest chef" Joan Gallagher pose with the tools of their trade.

communities. "The flower show helps us reach out to many people who might not come to see Peter Becker as part of searching for a retirement community, but when they visit during the flower show, tour the community and see what the food can be like—maybe they are ready to take a look," says Berster.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Two teams of three people face-off in this cooking competition styled after the Food Network's *Iron Chef America* program. PBC residents are invited to don their chef whites and compete alongside PBC chefs. Resident "guest" sous chefs are permitted to bring one ingredient of their choice, while PBC chefs, managed by Cura, provide pantry items such as flour, sugar, spices, fresh herbs, produce, pork, poultry and beef.

Each team has 1.5 hours to prepare three plated courses (appetizer, main entrée and dessert) using a secret ingredient in each course that is unveiled the day of the show. Berster chose salsify, a member of the aster family that has an inner milky, sticky substance similar to that of a coconut. "Selecting the secret ingredient is the most interesting part to me. It brings up some 'food' discussion among residents," she adds. The unusual vegetable was not so foreign to the audience. "I love it," said one resident when asked if anyone had ever heard of salsify.

Teams prepare three servings and one "show plate" of each course for a panel of three judges. While cooking experience is not a prerequisite, some residents do have culinary expertise. Marge Janoski, 88, has served as a resident "guest" judge for the past three years. She is a college gradu-

ate who received culinary arts training sponsored by the Statler Hotels and she is certified by the American Restaurant Association. Although retired from teaching home economics in Princeton and Wayne, N. J. schools, Mrs. Janoski still enjoys baking and watching others cook. "I enjoy the *Iron Chef* show, but now I pay more attention to how they judge," she laughs.

Team scores were calculated based upon a 20-point system, with a maximum of 10 points given for taste, five for presentation and five for originality. The final scores were separated by only a two-point difference, according to Berster.

Team Tempura (made up of two PBC chefs, Edward Varon and Jennifer Benner, and PBC resident Joan Gallagher) was victorious. Gallagher, 78, from Lansdale, Penn., is a "legacy" resident because her parents were PBC residents for 30 years. "I've always been interested in food preparation and love to see the results," she says. Mrs. Gallagher and her "chef mates" incorporated salsify into gnocchi, soufflé and even ice cream, which gave Team Tem-

pura the edge on originality. The gnocchi appetizer was accompanied with seared scallops and jumbo shrimp in vegetable salsify primavera sauce.



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The Chefs' Challenge also helps residents make a stronger connection with the members of their dining team. "This is where this event really shines. Some of the participating chefs work in the health center kitchen, so many of people in residential living don't get a chance to know them or what they can do. I think when they see the creativ-

ity of the chefs we have in all areas of our dining services operations, they know that they can count on a great dining experience no matter where they are on campus," says Berster. "The Chefs' Challenge is just great fun for us to do. I hope we can keep it up for a long time."

THE CHALLENGE AT SHERWOOD OAKS

The Chefs' Challenge has been so successful that Cura has taken the event to other CCRCs it manages. Residents of

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Sherwood Oaks in Cranberry Township, Penn., participated in the event for the first time recently.

The Sherwood Oaks competition had a few different rules, however. The mystery ingredient, tomato, was announced days before the event, which gave the teams an opportunity to meet before the competition to pool histories, recipes and dreams. Then they came up with plans for an appetizer, a salad and an entrée, each made with tomatoes.

Team Ryle (named after Sherwood's dining production manager, Ryle David) took top honors with turkey breast dredged in cornmeal, served over sautéed vegetables and accompanied by a Roma tomato filled with beans. At the conclusion of the event, team members received their toques (chef's hats) and bamboo cutting boards as mementos of "well done" cooking.

SUMMARY

Food entertainment events are held frequently at Cura-managed communities. They increase socialization among older adults and, most importantly, enhance life around great food. **LTL**



Team Ryle wins Chefs' Challenge. From left to right: Richard Pospistle, Kelley Noble and Anne Williams.

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