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Saegertown senior Lexi Skelton scrapes brownie batter from a mixer at Crawford Tech recently. Skelton was part of a culinary team that took first place in the restaurant management competition at the recent 10th Annual Pennsylvania ProStart Competition hosted by the Pennsylvania Restaurant & Lodging Association.

Delectable dining

Crawford Tech cooks up some winners

By Mike Crowley

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It's dinnertime in Meadville and you find yourself in the mood for something special. This is no run-of-the-mill midweek hankering: The occasion calls for a three-course

gourmet meal, in fact.

Perhaps a salmon pâté wrapped in summer squash to start would sound nice? For an entrée, how about a classic frenched and stuffed chicken leg quarter paired with tournée potatoes and beets? And to finish, what could be nicer than a chocolate Ro-

mano cheesecake with a sweet dark cherry sauce for dessert?

But the real question, when you're in Meadville, is where to find such a meal — where to go for this truly gold medal-winning menu?

The answer is not likely to be on

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your list of go-to restaurants or even the places reserved for special occasions, but it has an ambience all its own: Crawford Tech.

That mouthwatering meal earned four stars for one team of Tech students and a restaurant concept pitch to a panel of pros received rave reviews for another as both teams brought home gold medals last week from the 2024 Pennsylvania ProStart Invitational competition at the Penn Stater Hotel & Conference Center in State College.

Chef Tim Brown, who leads the school's culinary arts and restaurant management course, started to have a good feeling when he sensed a buzz among judges for both events and heard congratulations from others who had seen the Crawford Tech students perform. Back inside their kitchen at the school days later, the excitement was still evident when he and members of the two winning teams recounted their experience.

"I'm blessed, I really am," Brown said Tuesday as students removed a batch of chocolate chip birthday cake cookies from a nearby oven. "It's very good here — this is the best job I've ever had."

By taking first in both the culinary and management divisions of the state competition, the two teams of five students each qualified for the National ProStart Student Invitational taking place in late April in Baltimore, Maryland. ProStart is a training program for culinary students supported by the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation.

In the coming weeks, both teams will continue fine tuning their performances in hopes of finishing among the finest in the nation.

For the culinary team, that means more practice preparing their three courses. The meal was good last week, obviously, but the team hopes to improve before the national competition.

"I'm excited to kind of revise and make any changes that I can play with," said Gabriel Clayton, a senior from PENNCREST Cyber Academy, "and see what other ingredients could be added or taken out because we have the opportunity to perfect it



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Crawford Christian Academy student Madilyn Ly (left) and Meadville Area Senior High student Charris Hall make chocolate chip birthday cake cookies at Crawford Tech on Tuesday afternoon.

a little more."

Two goals in particular are on the table for each of the team members.

"Make it better —," said Caidence Meacham, the Meadville Area Senior High (MASH) senior.

"And quicker," Simon Farrelly-Jackson emphasized. A MASH junior, Farrelly-Jackson served as the manager during the competition while the four other team members prepared the meal, but he still had his hands full, at least figuratively.

"Once there's an issue and somebody starts complaining about it," Farrelly-Jackson explained, "I need to figure out how to fix it."

Time is very much an issue in the competition: Using just two butane burners, team members have an hour to prepare their three courses. In State College a week ago, they finished in 61 minutes, 30 seconds. With 21 teams in the field, every point mattered, but the taste and presentation of their meal were still strong enough for the win.

Time is even more of a concern as they look ahead to the national competition, however, because they have only finished their ambitious menu in less than 60 minutes one

time — during a practice session at the school.

There's good reason time is an issue: There's a lot to do.

MASH senior Christian Durham-Lencioni worked on the sides for the entree, incorporating classical cuts that helped distinguish the meal.

"I was cutting the whole time," he said, "making sure they looked real nice for the plate."

Sam Little, a Crawford Christian Academy junior, was in charge of the chicken that is at the heart of the entree's striking visual impact. The frenched drumstick must be mad to stand, like an upside-down lollipop. The final result requires skillful cutting followed by brief steaming before being fried — and it doesn't always work perfectly.

"One fell over," Little said. Fortunately, each team prepares dinner for two — one for presentation and another for judges to sample. The toppled drumstick thus became the one that was consumed.

Meacham, in the meantime, was crafting the visually stunning dessert inspired by the taste of a cherry cordial, a semi-spherical cheesecake

atop a crumbly base with bits of pistachio chopped in. The final product resembled a work of art but went down easy as well.

"I practiced my chocolate work for weeks straight. I was just on parchment paper almost every day trying to get the design down," Meacham said. "I thought it would taste good, and apparently it did."

Clayton was simultaneously aiming for an eye-catching dish of his own as he crafted the salmon pate appetizer. To achieve it, he painstakingly shaved and cooked summer squash then laid it out to wrap the pate.

"That's what gives it that pinstripe appearance of alternating color," Clayton said.

While the Tech students competing in the culinary division were working over the shared burners, the management team was facing heat of its own. Having developed a restaurant concept and marketing plan, the team pitched its idea to a roomful of about 30 seasoned restaurant industry veterans in what team member Grace Worley, a Saegertown Junior-Senior High junior, compared to "an episode of 'Shark Tank.'"

With poster displays on either side

of the stage area, Worley was joined by four seniors: Madilyn Ly from Crawford Christian Academy, Charris Hall from MASH, Lexi Skelton from Cambridge Springs Junior-Senior High, and Evelyn Kelly from Cochran Junior-Senior High.

The team swung for the stars with its restaurant pitch, Le Stelle, a planetarium-themed Italian-American restaurant that takes its name from the Italian term for the stars.

"Le Stelle connects people to the universe and one another," team members wrote in the concept description they submitted as part of the competition. "Whether it is a mystical dinner date or a soothing night out, Le Stelle is a unique approach to stellar food."

Conceived as a dinner-only destination, the team's plans touched on hours of operation, floor plan, social media marketing campaigns and more. The stars did not always align to smooth the way during the development process, particularly since each team member had strong leadership qualities and a bit of stubbornness.

"Working with anyone in a group of five is stressful, I'd say, because there's just so many different opinions," Worley said. "You can't do everything you want to do and you have to compromise and do what's best for the concept."

"It was a learning experience to collaborate with one another," Ly added.

By the time the team members made it in front of the panel of judges in State College, they were ready.

"It was definitely very anxious just to be in front of everybody, but it was something new," Skelton recalled. "Once you got up there it was more fun than it was stressful."

In addition to their gold medals and the chance to compete in Baltimore, winning team members were also received \$2,000 scholarship offers for Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Punxsutawney campus, according to Brown, which Hall and Meacham expect to take advantage of.

"They walked off the stage with the gold medal," Brown recalled, "and the IUP lady gave them the \$2,000 scholarship right there on the spot."

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