

---

Published Aug. 23, 2019 at 11:04AM

## Young 'Iron Chefs' show off new skills



Team #1 plates up their award winning dish made with ground beef, bell peppers, pearled couscous and tomato sauce, an interest almost spaghetti like dish. From left is Brooke Eckstein, Hunter McAlister and Giselle Sanchez(Sabrina Thompson, The Observer)

---

Four teams of middle school students battled it out at the Oregon State University Extension Services office Wednesday afternoon. They were showing off all they had learned the last eight weeks as members of the Iron Chef in the Nutrition Kitchen competition.

This is the first year for this class to be offered, taught by Jamie Cox, a program assistant for SNAP Education. SNAP-Ed is a federal program funded by the U.S Department of agriculture that teaches about nutrition to improve the likelihood that persons eligible for

the USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program will make healthy food choices within a limited budget and choose physically active lifestyles.

Cox taught the 11 middle school students about cooking, from proper food handling and safety to nutrition and knife skills.

"I thought it would be a lot of fun to teach kids how to cook," Cox said. "It's a really good skill for them and it's really important for when they are on their own."

Some of the students in the class had no kitchen experience, while others, Cox said, had clearly helped a lot at home. And the parents of those who hadn't previously assisted shared with Cox that their children are now asking to assist in the kitchen or cook meals.

"My favorite part (about teaching the class) was seeing how far the kids have come," Cox said.

The competition Wednesday was meant for the students to take all they had learned in the eight-week course and apply it to a mixed skillet meal. Using a protein, veggies, grains, spices, cheese and a secret ingredient, the teams presented unique creations to three judges.

Scoring was done based on four categories. Professionalism: how well the work station was cleaned and maintained as well as food safety. Teamwork: the students' ability to work together and share responsibilities. Techniques and skills: proper knife handling, measuring and the ability to follow the recipe. And product: presentation, taste, nutritional value and creativity. Students presented their finished plates to the judges and answered questions about the cooking process and their decisions.

One of the students competing, an eighth-grader at Baker Web Academy, Spencer Hanna, enjoyed the freedom that this class offered while learning how to cook. He said that during the class they were given the chance to experiment and not be so carefully watched over.

“It opened my eyes to what combos are good, and about presentation,” Hanna said.

The winning team, which also happened to be named Team #1, made a skillet with ground beef, canned tomato sauce, bell peppers, broccoli and couscous and was sprinkled with white Italian cheese and crushed croutons. They had to use parsley as their secret ingredient. The dish was reminiscent of spaghetti, and according to the judges — OSU Extension employees, Family and Community Health/SNAP Educator Robin Maille, Office Specialist Sherry Nantz and agronomist Darrin Walenta — the pearled couscous was cooked perfectly. Members of the team were Giselle Sanchez, who will be a ninth-grader at La Grande High School, and Brooke Eckstein, who is entering sixth grade, and Hunter McAlister, a seventh-grader, at La Grande Middle School.

“It was fun learning how to use different techniques and cook different stuff,” Sanchez said.

Team #4 came in second, with Team #3 in third and Team #2 in fourth. Scores were very close, with only a few points separating the teams.

Each dish was unique and presented different flavors and skill levels. During the competition time, Cox and her assistant, Quinn Hanna, walked around, giving the students advice and guidance. Judges also wandered around carefully observing and asking the cooks questions as they worked.

The class was an opportunity to expose middle school students to cooking and nutrition in a hands-on program. The OSU Extension program partnered with 4-H, and the ingredients and supplies were funded by SNAP.