

Jr Iron Chef Vermont

Fun and food for thought, cooked up in a friendly competition that connects farms with local schools and students.

Story by Sarah Zobel
Photos by Tom Waters



Jr Iron Chef Vermont is a statewide competition, hosted by the Burlington School Food Project and Vermont FEED, that gives students the opportunity to gain hands-on experience creating and cooking nutritious, farm-fresh food. It highlights local agriculture and encourages students to make healthy eating choices and to understand more about nutrition, farm-fresh foods, the culinary arts, and school food systems.

INSIDE THE CAVERNOUS Blue Room Pavilion at the Champlain Valley Expo in Essex Junction on a gray March day, 235 middle- and high-school students from around the state bend over cutting boards and mixing bowls. Wearing matching toques and aprons and working in teams of three to five, they race against the clock to whip up entrées using specified local, seasonal ingredients: squash, honey, apples, beets, and beans, but also celeriac, parsnips, and wheat berries. Each team must prepare and cook an entrée in no more than 90 minutes—they'll have another hour to clean up and take a deep breath. Parents, friends, and community members mill about, but it is the panel of judges in the hushed room nearby that the students most want to impress. And when they do, it is with restaurant-worthy dishes such as “Save the Hen” nuggets with Nature’s Best BBQ sauce, “Saucy Asian Noodle Nosh,” and vegetarian chili with cornbread topping.

Now in its fifth year, Jr Iron Chef Vermont was the brainchild of a team of farm-to-school advocates, led by the Burlington School

Food Project and Vermont FEED. “As a parent, I can call my kids’ school and make suggestions or offer to help in the cafeteria,” says Doug Davis, director of the Burlington School Food Project. “But until the children are working with food, until they’re actually involved in the process and taking food from a tray that a farmer has grown, it’s not particularly meaningful.” Farm to School connects schools and local farms, with the ultimate goals of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias; improving student nutrition; providing agriculture, health, and nutrition opportunities to students; and supporting regional farmers.

Jr Iron Chef is based loosely on the Food Network’s *Iron Chef* series (which, in turn, was based on a Japanese program), in which a challenger competes against one of several celebrity “Iron” chefs using a specific secret ingredient with no advance preparation. In Jr Iron Chef Vermont, however, teams are allowed to practice—they are provided with a list of 20 or so local, seasonal ingredients a couple of months beforehand. Students work together to develop and refine recipes using a minimum of five of those ingredients; the caveat is that the recipes must be reproducible in a standard school kitchen.

“We are impressed how teams create delicious recipes using local ingredients,” says Libby McDonald, Jr Iron Chef Vermont coordinator at Vermont FEED, “especially with the additional challenge of meeting school food criteria of affordability and scalability.” Libby explains that she reviews recipes submitted by teams in advance to ensure feasibility: “If they were making burritos and wanted to have homemade tortillas, that’s not practical for a school kitchen.”

Each dish is scored according to five categories: taste—it must be kid friendly yet flavorful; appearance; creativity in both preparation and presentation; best and most use of local ingredients; and school food service appropriateness, in terms of both time and cost needed and level of nutrition. Teams are separated into middle school and high school; at both levels, prizes are awarded in three categories: Best in Show, Most Creative Dish, and Greatest Number and Best Use of Local Ingredients.

In the 2011 middle-school competition, Team Murdock from Twin Valley



The Centerpoint Food Fighters team from Centerpoint School in South Burlington won the Most Creative award for their blue mash with roots and rings. The 5th annual Jr Iron Chef Vermont event is planned for March 24, 2012, and has many creative, youthful teams with humorous names such as the Vermonsters, the Pureeing Pipsqueaks, the Platonic Pickled Prunes, the Veggie Cleavers, and the North Country Narwhals confirmed to participate.



The Rebel Chefs from South Burlington High School won the Best Use of Local Ingredients award for their veggie chili with cornbread topping. Teams in the Jr Iron Chef Vermont competition may consist of three to five students and must have an adult team supervisor, but only students may cook during the competition.

Middle School won Best in Show for their dried cherry, root vegetable chili with potato pancakes. That category was also won by a Twin Valley High School team, Hakuna Matata, for their empanada with pico de gallo with cilantro, lime, and sour cream. Lonny Paige, Jr Iron Chef director at Twin Valley, has guided his students to Best in Show awards each of the four years in the competition’s history. Says Lonny, “There is no recipe for success.

The only item each of our Best in Show teams have had is excellent teamwork—it’s more common in Jr Iron Chef than in any other sport I’ve been a part of.”

Across the competition, those teams are frequently comprised of groups of friends who signed up together, but just as often they are schoolmates who didn’t know each other before joining the team. “We have an eclectic group of participants,” says Sharon Academy teacher and coach Keenan Haley. “I’ve

Just the facts

The 2012 Jr Iron Chef Vermont competition will be held on March 24 at the Champlain Valley Expo in Essex Junction. Competition information and recipes for all entries from past years are available on the Vermont FEED website, vtfeed.org.



The team Shaolin Chefs (left) from Brattleboro Union High School was one of seven high school and five middle school teams participating that hailed from Windham County. Besides being an educational and competitive event that has tasty benefits, Jr Iron Chef Vermont raises funds for Vermont farm-to-school programs hosted by Vermont FEED, a joint effort of Food Works at Two Rivers Center, Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, Shelburne Farms, and the Burlington School Food project.

seen children who may not necessarily get along in other areas work collaboratively and positively together.” He adds that the competition gives children who may not stand out in the classroom or on the sports field a chance to shine. And some schools have so many interested students that they must hold team tryouts. Sharon Academy and Twin Valley both host their own mini-competitions to choose the teams that will represent their schools at the Expo.

Teams generally meet once or twice a week for a couple of months to develop their recipes and to refine their preparation techniques. There is a lot of trial and error for the young chefs during that time. Leland & Gray Union High School’s Rebels 1 team made dumplings with carrots, using 10 or so ingredients on the list. Team members Katie Finnegan and Olivia Reilly confessed that the first time they made the recipe, they put in too much soy sauce, since they hadn’t really cooked with it before. But over time they perfected their recipe and were pleased to serve it to their families, to rave reviews. “We had it for lunch and dinner the next day!” says Katie.

Teachers, food service personnel, professional chefs, paraeducators, parents, or community members may coach teams. The panel of judges is made up of invited teachers, food service directors, farmers, journalists, and others, with a new list each year. Vermont Commissioner of Education Armando Vilaseca was among them at last year’s competition. “The Farm to School program is a great way of providing our students with healthy, delicious lunches and opportunities to connect their habits with local economies,” he explains. “It’s also exciting that it has become engrained in the curriculum in areas like math, science, writing, reading, and history.” Armando notes that one of the winning teams was comprised of boys from an alternative school, commenting, “That shows that hands-on applied learning is a very good way of engaging students.”

In 2011, event sponsor Blodgett brought in 10 ovens to give students another cooking option, beyond the burners they already had. Those will come in handy during the fifth-anniversary competition, when some 250-plus students are expected to take part. New

prizes will include the “Lively Local Award,” the “Simple Spoon Award,” and the “Crowd Pleasing Award.”

Burlington School Food Project’s Doug Davis says, “We would love to have it more accessible to more schools. It’s all about making farm to school sustainable. As people see how important it is to get our kids involved in our own food systems and to respect the work that farmers do—we just have to keep the momentum going.”

Echoing that, and reminding both participants and audience members what has brought them to the Expo, Judging Captain Mark Molinaro, New England Culinary Institute chef instructor, pauses before announcing the contest winners.

“Write a letter to a farmer,” he says to the crowd, the teenagers bouncing on their toes, their parents smiling behind them. “Go visit them and say ‘thank you.’”

Sarah Zobel writes for a variety of regional and national publications. She lives in Essex Junction with her husband and two sons, and aspires to be a competent chef someday.