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Who'll taste victory?

Home chef finalists try to score winning basket

By **Marty Meitus, Rocky Mountain News**
July 13, 2005

The 18th Annual Share Our Strength's Taste of the Nation benefit has added a twist this year - a "mystery basket" competition between two finalists for the title of Top Home Chef in Denver. (Anyone in the Rocky Mountain region was eligible to enter.)

In addition to sampling food from 40 restaurants and sipping products from 60 wineries, participants in the charity event can watch the food fight live.

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The finalists - Heather Carroll, of Colorado Springs, and Lisa M. Givens, of Westminster - beat two other cooks in a semifinal round a couple of weeks ago and will meet in the finals at 4:30 p.m. Sunday at the Denver Convention Center.

In the semifinals, they had to put together a meal in 20 minutes from a basket of foods handed to them at the start of the competition. The basket contained such disparate ingredients as chicken breasts with bones, rice, couscous, garbanzo beans, spices, canned tomatoes and blue cheese.

The competitors were selected based on essays and sample recipes.



Marc Piscotty © News

Daughter Molly, 3, watches her mom Heather Carroll whip up a Greek pasta dish at their Colorado Springs home. Carroll is a finalist for Top Home Chef at Share Our Strength's Taste of the Nation in Denver Sunday., left, of Colorado Springs will face off against Lisa Givens of Westminster in a timed cook-off Sunday at the Taste of the Nation event at the Colorado Convention Center. Each of the women competed against other cooks to qualify.



Greek Pasta

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Andrew Lubatty, executive chef at the Avenue Grill in Denver, was one of the judges for the semifinals and also will judge the finals. "I wasn't looking at it from a chef's point of view, but as a cook. I looked for creativity and how they used the ingredients. Flavor and presentation was a huge part and so was texture."

Lubatty says he'll look not only at how well they use the ingredients but also how they adjust to the pressure.

"They were nervous, really nervous (in the semifinals), and they were uncomfortable with the equipment. They were all fighting their environment a little bit, and I took that into consideration, so this time, it will be interesting to see what they come up with.

"Good food is good food. I appreciate what people do at home just as much as what we do at restaurants."

Heather Carroll

Vital statistics: Married to Tom Carroll, a systems administrator; 38; former legal administrator; four children: Megan, 5, Molly, 3, Isabella and Emma, 10 months.

Why she entered the contest: Somebody sent the entry form to my husband and he said, "Look at this - that sounds kind of cool." I sent it in the night before it was due.

Where she draws her inspiration: I like to come up with dishes that the kids will like, that are healthy and that my husband will like. My 5-year-old says she wants to be a chef, and she's never changed her mind, so that's kind of inspiring, to keep trying new recipes.

The challenge of feeding a family: It's hard to come up with something everybody likes - they all have so many different tastes. We all do sit down together. If it's something they don't like, I give them another option, like a sandwich.

What she made at the semifinals: The rule was whatever you wanted to make, so I made a pasta with some spices and chicken. It was kind of a Mediterranean pasta. I used the blue cheese, which was fine, although I would have used feta instead.

Why she hopes she wins: The prize is \$5,000 worth of Jenn-Air appliances. It would be great, because we moved in (to her house) a year ago, and we've had people come out two times (to fix) the oven, three times for the dishwasher, and the microwave died. The fridge is white and everything else is black, so it would be nice.

Sample from her essay: I want us to all enjoy food, to eat great meals together and to be able to make good food choices. I hope that if I can prepare meals that taste great and are nutritious, my daughters will know that they can, too, and will be able to choose and prepare foods that will provide them with the best possible chance to live healthy lives.

Lisa M. Givens

Vital statistics: Single; 45; 22 years in corporate

telecommunications; in April started new career as personal chef, A Gourmet A-Way Personal Chef Service, <http://www.agourmetaway.com/> or e-mail pc-lisa@agourmetaway.com.

Why she entered the contest: I'm originally from New Orleans. I grew up watching my parents cook and I've always had a love for cooking. I'd take a week's vacation and take classes at the cooking schools . . . I thought (the contest) sounded interesting, so I spent a little bit of time working on my essay. (Because she turned pro shortly before entries were due, the judges felt she still qualified as a home chef.)

Where she draws her inspiration: My dad was a seaman on a ship, and he was one of the cooks. He would be gone a lot of the time, but when he was home, he would cook. My mother was a good cook, too. Her specialty was gumbo and she cooked red beans and rice. My degree is in math, because that was another love; I have a master's degree in computer science, so I'm technically trained. All the things I've gained in the corporate field help me to manage a business - how I organize myself, how I approach recipes.

The fun of cooking for others: I started my business in April (she goes to the client's home and cooks, then freezes the meals). One night I had prepared a meal for my pastors - a husband-and-wife team - and . . . at 11 o'clock the phone rang and she said, "I just had to call and tell you how glad we were that there was a meal waiting." . . . And then she said, "What *did* you do to those green beans?"

What she made at the semifinals: I made a sauteed chicken breast with a creamy blue cheese sauce, and I fried the bacon and crumbled it over sauteed spinach.

Sample from her essay: I (would like to be) Denver's Top Home chef because of my passion for cooking and my desire to create food and food experiences that feed the body, mind and spirit! . . . Being creative in the kitchen is a key to my success as a chef. Having experimented with traditional recipes, I have created more health-conscious dishes as a result of my own health challenges. While I like to use cookbooks, I also create my own recipes with a concentration on simplicity and flavor.

If you go

- **What:** Denver's 18th Annual Taste of the Nation, a program of Share Our Strength, is the granddaddy of tastings - the longest-running food and wine event in Denver. Included will be gourmet cuisine from more than 40 of Denver's top chefs, wine tastings from more than 60 wineries, Coors beer, entertainment and a silent auction.
- **When:** 4 to 7 p.m. Sunday, with a VIP reception at 3 p.m.
- **Where:** Colorado Convention Center, 700 14th St.
- **Theme:** Diners of Denver Unite! The event is designed around Denver neighborhoods, including Washington Park, Cherry Creek, the Golden Triangle, LoDo and South Denver. Event-goers will

"tour" the neighborhoods, identified by street signs, local parks and city landmarks. Wineries will be placed in each neighborhood, and beer will be available at the Coors Beer Garden. Guests with VIP tickets will have access to a private seating area.

- **Tickets:** General admission is \$60 in advance, \$65 at the door, VIP tickets \$150, available at participating King Soopers, <http://www.denvertasteofthenation.org> or 303-297-0408.

- **Benefits:** Taste of the Nation events across the country benefit the hungry and the homeless on a national, state and local level. Colorado recipients include Food Bank of the Rockies, Women's Bean Project, Operation Frontline and Volunteers of America.

- **Of note:** The Top Home Chefs cook-off starts at 4:30 p.m. with Food Network TV personality and food and wine expert David Rosengarten serving as emcee and moderator.

Greek Pasta

Makes 4 servings

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

3 cloves garlic, minced

1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper

1 pound penne or rotini pasta

1/2 cup chicken broth

3 cups fresh baby spinach

1/4 cup sliced black olives

4 ounces crumbled feta cheese

- In a small bowl, combine extra virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar, garlic, and black pepper; set aside.

- Cook pasta in a large pot according to package directions. Drain pasta and return to pot. Add chicken broth, olive oil mixture, and spinach.

- Cook over low heat just until spinach wilts. Add black olives and feta cheese; mix well.

- Serve immediately; garnish with additional feta cheese if desired. Makes four servings. - Heather Carroll

Nutritional information per serving: 643 cal., 22 g fat (7 g sat.), 25 mg chol., 90 g carb., 477 mg sodium, 5 g fiber, 20 g pro.

Shrimp And Black Bean Quesadillas

Serves 4

1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

1 clove garlic, minced

1/2 pound shrimp (peeled, deveined, tails removed)

1/2 teaspoon dried cumin

8 whole wheat tortillas (burrito size)

1 (15-ounce) can black beans, drained

1 (15-ounce) can whole kernel sweet corn, drained

2 cups shredded Monterey Jack cheese

1/2 cup peach salsa (optional)

- Preheat oven to lowest setting.
- Heat olive oil in medium nonstick skillet. Add garlic and sauté for one minute.
- Add shrimp and cumin, sauté until shrimp are pink (approximately five minutes), turning shrimp at least once during cooking.
- Remove shrimp from pan, place on cutting board, and coarsely chop. Warm black beans and corn in microwave for two minutes each.
- On one-half of each tortilla, sprinkle approximately 2 tablespoons each of chopped shrimp, black beans, and corn. Then sprinkle each with approximately ¼ cup of cheese.
- Fold each tortilla in half. Heat griddle or large skillet over medium-high heat.
- Place filled tortillas on griddle or skillet (as many as will fit on pan at a time) for 2 minutes, carefully turn over and heat other side for an additional 2 minutes, until tortillas are lightly browned and cheese is melted.
- Keep finished quesadillas in warm oven until all are done. Remove and cut each quesadilla into three equal pie-shaped wedges with a pizza cutter.
- Arrange wedges on large platter. Serve remaining black beans and corn along side quesadillas.
- Serve quesadillas with peach salsa (or your favorite salsa) for dipping.
- Note: For spicier quesadillas, add a pinch of your favorite dried chile powder to the shrimp when sautéing. - Heather Carroll

Nutritional information per serving: 712 cal., 28 g fat (13 g sat.), 137 mg chol., 78 g carb., 1459 mg sodium, 12 g fiber, 41 g pro.

Shrimp Creole

Servings: 4

2 1/2 pounds shrimp, raw, unpeeled

1 1/2 tablespoons olive oil

1 1/2 tablespoons flour

1/2 cup onion, chopped

1/3 cup green pepper, chopped

1/4 cup celery, finely chopped

1 8-ounce can tomato sauce

1 16-ounce can Italian tomatoes, canned, reserving liquid

1 garlic clove, minced

3 dashes of Tabasco pepper sauce

2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce

1 teaspoon sugar

2 teaspoons salt

1/4 teaspoon pepper

2 tablespoons parsley, chopped

3/4 cups green onion, chopped

- Peel and devein the shrimp.
- In a Dutch oven or large sauce pan, heat oil and add flour, stirring constantly until mixture (roux) is golden brown. Add onion, green pepper, and celery and cook until tender.
- Pour in tomato sauce, tomatoes and their liquid. Blend well.
- Add garlic, Tabasco, Worcestershire sauce, sugar, salt and pepper. Simmer 30 minutes. Stir occasionally.
- Add the shrimp, parsley and green onions and simmer for another 30 minutes.
- Serve over white rice. - Lisa Givens

Nutritional information per serving, not including rice: 418 cal., 11 g fat (2 g sat.), 431 mg chol., 19 g carb., 2240 mg sodium, 3 g fiber, 61 g pro.

Marty Meitus is the food editor. Meitasm@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-5229

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