

Eastside High culinary students compete for the right to send their creation into space

A team of students from Eastside High Schools Institute of Culinary Arts (ICA) hopes it has created a dish that will be out of this world—literally.

Team members Alani Cromwell, Connor Mayor, George Smith and Sirius Brown have made it to the semifinals of the NASA Astronaut Culinary Challenge, which is sponsored annually by NASA and the American Culinary Federation. Eastside's team is one of just 36 from across the country to make the cut.



During a recent 'cook-off' with two other semifinalist teams from Florida, the students prepared their dish under the watchful eyes of a panel of expert judges, who will decide if they'll move on to the national competition in Houston, Texas in April. The top team will have its dish processed by the Johnson Space Center Food Lab for consumption by the astronauts aboard the International Space Station.

"This is a big deal and a big responsibility for the winning team that gets its meal up to space for the astronauts," said Jacqui Pressinger, Director of Strategic Partnerships for the American Culinary Federation. "But whoever wins, it's a great experience for all the students and we hope it creates more awareness about all the careers available in the industry."

To reach semifinalist status, the students had to create a recipe that met strict NASA nutritional guidelines. They also had to submit a research paper that addressed such issues as the impact of zero gravity on their dish and proper packaging for space travel.

"There was a lot of science and research behind what they did with this competition, and they had to hit all the benchmarks," said ICA Director Chef Pam Bedford. "It wasn't easy, but they figured it out."

"It was definitely a challenge to get all the nutritional values and facts in order," said junior Sirius Brown.

"We had to practice and practice to make the flavors right," said senior George Smith.

When the students started working on their entry back in October, they were focused on creating a taco entree in keeping with the 'ethnic dish' theme of this year's competition. But the realities of eating in space eventually led them to create a recipe for a quesadilla—although the original 'Tacos in Space' name stuck.

The students won't know until March whether or not they'll be traveling to Houston for the finals. But they agree that they are proud to have made it this far and that they enjoyed the process.

"I was around people I really love," said senior Alani Cromwell. "Teamwork is critical. You have to trust other people and you have to trust yourself and know that you can do what you set your mind to."

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