Acing the final exam, ‘Chopped’ style

When Anne Baldzikowski asked if I wanted to judge the finals of her beginning dessert class, I jumped at the chance. In fact, I invited my grandson Aedan Carlton to join me because he plans to take culinary classes at Cabrillo College after he graduates from Soquel High School. We arrived to find a buzz of activity in the kitchens as 18 students were doing last-minute prep on their desserts. Six teams of three students each were challenged, “Chopped” style to make a dessert using pastry cream. Three secret ingredients were revealed as they arrived at class: fresh apple, cacao nibs and walnuts. Each dessert had to include all three, or they could not receive full scores.

Five judges evaluated each of the six desserts. The first team presented a scene made with the nuts and cacao nibs, sliced and filled with pastry cream, and a clever apple butterfly on the side. Next, we tried a tender muffin filled with pastry cream.

A delicious gluten-free pie had a crust made with ground walnuts blended with the cacao nibs. A chocolate “fallen angel” cake was filled with pastry cream and decorated with whipped cream.

The winner was a pie filled with pastry cream that had been blended with whipped cream to give it a lighter texture. Caramelised apple slices decorated the top. By that point, we couldn’t eat another bite.

In addition to semester-long culinary classes, Ann teaches through the Cabrillo College Extension. Her classes have included making your own chocolate, galettes, candy, apple desserts, French pastry basics, appetizers, and much more. For information, go to cabrillo.edu/services/extension or call 831-479-6331. A few fall semester classes are still available. The spring schedule will be published soon.

DONNA’S RECIPE OF THE WEEK

The Food Network is a great resource for holiday recipes. This one caught my eye because of its creativity.

ITALIAN SPUMANI COOKIES

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper. Mix the flour, baking powder and salt in a small bowl. Set aside.

2. In a large bowl, whisk the butter, brown sugar, and granulated sugar until combined. Add the whole egg, egg yolk and almond and vanilla extracts. Mix well.

3. Slowly fold the flour mixture into the sugar-egg mixture with a rubber spatula until even. Fold in the chocolate chips, pistachios, and cherries or cranberries.

4. Shape the dough into about 1/4 cup balls. Place about 2 inches apart on the prepared baking sheets.

5. Bake 10 minutes. Rotate the sheets 180 degrees, switch racks, and bake until slightly golden brown, 8-10 more minutes. Cool, and enjoy with a hot cappuccino.

TIP OF THE WEEK: My brother John says to clean your sink with a cup of hydrogen peroxide. Wait an hour, and run the water. It will “digest” that black gunk in the pipe.

DONNA MAURILLO
Food for Thought

THE ITALIAN SPUMANI COOKIES from the Food Network include the classic spumoni flavor combination of chocolate, pistachio and cherry.

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