

Fabulous food prepared for Funfest contest

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Published: September 11, 2011

Meatball against meatball, pizza against pizza. Chefs went head to head vying for top honors in two Funfest food competitions on Saturday.

Meatball masters were first to step into the ring from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Five competitors brought in pre-made meatballs without sauce, allowing the public and a blind panel of judges to taste test them to find out whose were best.

More than 100 tickets were sold to the public so they could judge, Dolly Forte, meatball contest coordinator, said. And one by one, the public made its way down a line of five booths stationed together on West Broad Street to taste them and then vote for their favorite.

Debbie Vito, co-owner of Frankie's Pizzeria, Hazleton, said she and her daughter, Lauren, made 300 meatballs in one hour using a recipe they devised from multiple family recipes. Vito said they joined the competition after their customers suggested they enter.

Though in the restaurant business for years, this was the first time they entered a food competition.

Mike Bloom of West Hazleton, an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer serving with the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails, was joined by his fiancée, Tara Snyder of West Hazleton. Snyder, who didn't stall as she said Bloom was a good cook and predicted he would win, joked, "That's why I'm marrying him; he's a good cook."

Bloom cooked up 18 pounds of meatballs and handed out his recipe to those who passed by. He found the recipe online but tweaked it after realizing he didn't have some of the ingredients it called for. Bloom said he made his own blend of Italian seasonings and his own homemade bread crumbs for the meatballs, in what was his second food competition.

John Rapach, vice president of the Hazleton Area High School Band Parents, entered his fourth Funfest food competition, representing the marching band, and hoped to continue the club's winning streak. Rapach was joined by his son, Austin, 14, who just joined the school band this year.

Rapach used an old family recipe that involves an hours-long process of slow cooking the meatballs to keep them tender. He said he was taught to cook meatballs by his mother when he was 5 years old and has used the recipe so many times that he makes them by memory and doesn't rely on a recipe card.

"They're always a hit," Rapach said.

The Hazleton Area Career Center junior and senior culinary arts classes both entered batches of meatballs, pinning classes against each other. The junior class made close to 400 meatballs and because of teamwork, they felt they would clinch the title, said Jacob, a student, who didn't want to give his last name.

"We have a lot of good competition and different styles of meatballs," Alysha Milore said, while standing next to Jacob, waiting to hand out another sample to the public.

Alyssa Fuehrer and Lindsey Balas, both of the senior class, said they also worked together to make Balas' father's recipe. The girls said they were asked to be in the competition and thought it would be a good idea.

Carly Rossi, 17, also a culinary arts student at the school, entered the competition solo, using her

family's own meatball recipe, after setting a goal to do so when she was younger. She began cooking at 3 years old with her grandmother, Betty Rossi, who's a teacher at the Career Center. Carly said the meatballs are made with simple ingredients, passed down from generation to generation.

"It's just an old Italian recipe," she said.

Mildred Bove, of Hazleton, said she attended most of the Funfest food competitions to see how other people's recipes taste. Chewing her way through four of the competitors' meatballs, so far the junior class' recipe was her favorite. As she took a bite of the browned meat, she smiled.

By 2:30 p.m., competitors lined up at a Funfest stage at Broad and Laurel streets to hear the winners announced. Students from the culinary classes, clad in white cooking jackets, held hands seconds before the announcement was made that Rossi's meatballs won first place and also captured the People's Choice award. Rossi broke down into tears after claiming her plaques commemorating the achievement. She said she was speechless after finding out she won and said she would find a special place on her wall to hang them.

Frankie's Pizzeria won second place and the band parents third place.

Cold pizza was the next competition, from 3 to 5:30 p.m. pinning a long-time local favorite, Longo's Bakery, against a relatively new cold pizza in town from Frankie's.

Rocco Colangelo Jr., a Funfest Committee member, said Frankie's won the judges' and people's choice awards. Frankie's has been making cold pizza for about four years, Debbie Vito said.

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