Today on Across the Fence we're in the kitchen as a preview to this coming Saturday’s Junior Iron Chef Vermont competition. The event is cooking up delicious and creative dishes from young inspired chefs across the state. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. The fifth annual Junior Iron Chef Vermont competition is this Saturday at the Champlain Valley Exposition in Essex Junction. Junior Iron Chef is a statewide competitive event giving students an opportunity to experience preparing and cooking nutritious farm fresh foods. This year more than 70 teens from middle schools and high schools will be participating. In just a few minutes we're going to meet members of a team from the Colchester Middle School but first I want to introduce two people who have been preparing the young chefs in Colchester for Saturday's competition. Deana Novembrino is the owner of In Season Personal Chef and Nutrition Services and she's a registered dietitian with the Vermont Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Connie Gavin is a food and consumer science teacher at Colchester Middle School. Thanks so much for being with us. Connie this is your fourth time taking a team to the Junior Iron Chef competition. Tell us a little bit about the competition and your experience with it.

Connie.: Sure, it is a very exciting event hosted by Burlington Food Service program and also Vermont Feed food education every day and we will be competing against 50 other middle school teams all charged with the task of creating original dishes that highlight at least a minimum of five local Vermont foods. There are many Vermont foods but they are all seasonal to the winter season so it's somewhat limited and is a challenge. My role as the coach is to facilitate the team but during the event I am not allowed to do any cooking just supervising for safety.

Judy.: So this is really hands on for the kids. How are these recipes judged?

Connie.: There's four criteria. There's the crowd pleasing award which is based on taste and texture. There's the lively local award which is the best use of Vermont ingredients. Then there's the simple spoon award which is a recipe that can easily be created and used in actual foodservice in schools and that's the overarching goal here is to get kids interacting with nutritional foods that can also be served in their schools.

Judy.: It's such a good idea. How's the team selected?
Connie.: It's really challenging to select a team because many middle schoolers love to cook so I get many applications every year but basically the middle schoolers come apply and express their interest. Those who are most committed to working as a team and can demonstrate safety skills are selected. I hope in the future for more teams from Colchester so we don't have to turn away any interested candidates.

Judy.: Let's talk to Deana and now you are professional chef and you're monitoring the team. How did you get involved with the Crazy Cookers?

Deana.: In addition to being a personal chef, I am also a registered dietitian with the Vermont Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. We were lucky enough to receive a mini grant from the Kids Eat Right Campaign this year.

Judy.: Can you tell me a little bit about the campaign?

Deana.: The Kids Eat Right Campaign is through our national organization, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Basically it's an initiative that's looking to childhood obesity prevention. They're working in conjunction with the White House. Their goal is to eliminate childhood obesity within a generation.

Judy.: How did your organization win this grant?

Deana.: We have the largest number of dietitians in the area. And they have become involved with the Kids Eat Right campaign. We really thought it was great to partner with the Junior Iron Chefs so we use our money to help support a local team in the area and that's how we came into play with Colchester.

Judy.: Without further ado, let's introduce the team members. They're going to talk about the recipe their preparing for the competition, called the ultimate winter harvest cheddar panini. That sounds delicious. Thanks for being here. Raven this is your first time being in the competition is that right?

Raven.: Yes.

Judy.: Why did you want to do that?

Raven.: 'cause I love cooking.

Judy.: Can you tell me a little bit about why you decided to join the team?

Raven.: I figured it would be a great opportunity to compete in the competition were eager to cook and make up your own on recipe.

Judy.: Excellent Christian this is your first time as well right?

Christian.: Yup.

Judy.: How did you decide on recipe?
Christian.: First we had to have five local ingredients that were kind of in the winter selection. And we brainstormed ideas and shared them out with a group. Our ideas were just put out there and we created two of them see which one you like better. We liked the panini better because we voted.

Judy.: So you are all involved in the decision-making process then.

Christian.: Yes and we've played with the ingredients and figured out the ultimate winter cheddar apple panini.

Judy.: Excellent. Raven what your role in cooking this panini?

Raven.: Cut and caramelize the onions.

Judy.: And those are right here I see. How about you Christian?

Christian.: I cut the apples and cheese and assembled and cook it.

Judy.: Excellent. So obviously local cheese we're using. Great. Thanks to both of you. let's welcome Natasha and Haley now, they are also teammates from Colchester Middle School. I guess there's honey mustard on the panini who is in charge of that?

Natasha.: I am.

Judy.: You are would you make it for us?

Natasha.: Sure. First you put 2 tablespoons of Dijon mustard which is right here. Then you put in 2 tablespoons of honey.

Judy.: This is local honey to right?

Natasha.: Yes.

Judy.: Excellent.

Natasha.: Then you put in Vermont maple syrup. Then you have to whisk together. There you go.

Judy.: That's it as easy as that? Wow looks good. Haley what other techniques did you learn?

Haley.: We learn to some cutting techniques.

Judy.: What did you learn about that can you show me something?

Haley.: First we put a wet paper towel underneath our cutting board to keep it from sliding. And when you're cutting you make sure to curl your fingers to keep them out of the way of the knife.

Judy.: Can you show us again and so we can get it closer on camera?

Haley.: Like that.
Judy.: Excellent so when the knife comes down your fingers are curled away. That's good. Haley what are you going to be doing in the competition?

Haley.: I am going to prepare and sauté the Swiss chard and plate.

Judy.: Now this is what the Swiss chard looks like. What did you have to do to prepare that?

Haley.: You get olive oil and garlic out put it in the pan and then put it in the pan and cook it.

Judy.: Have you ever worked with Swiss chard before?

Haley.: No.

Judy.: What did you think about the taste is a good?

Haley.: Yeah it is okay.

Judy.: All right well. So we have all the ingredients can you put it all together for me?

Haley.: yeah.

Judy.: OK good. What will we start with.

Natasha.: First you put the cheese on and let that melt. You put the caramelized onions shredded carrots Swiss chard and apple then top it off with more cheese more bread and then it's ready for the grill.

Judy.: How long do you have to grill it for?

Natasha.: Maybe 10 minutes. Not for long.

Judy.: OK. You have a special way to present and plate the panini?

Natasha.: Yes Haley does that.

Judy.: OK should we go ahead and plate this one up. Come on over Haley. So we have one that has conveniently been cooking which smells delicious. Why is it important to plate. Can't you just leave it like that?

Haley.: You get better judged if it looks better.

Judy.: OK. So you take the maple sauce.

Deana.: Haley came up with the idea to do it drizzle so looks pretty for everyone.

Judy.: That looks terrific. So here we go I'm going to put it over here. Tell me a little bit about from a nutrition standpoint why did this fit the criteria?
Deana.: Sure one of the things that we used was whole grain bread which the kids were a little bit worried about using especially serving it in the cafeteria because a lot of kids do not prefer the whole wheat bread. But it's definitely going to be adding a lot of fiber and are also getting tons of vitamins from the carrots and Swiss chard. Some fiber from the apples onions. Adds a nice sweetness with honey mustard I think. And don't forget the cheese.

Judy.: Well you always have to have cheese. Can you tell me why these ingredients were picked? Know the Swiss chard was unusual for a sandwich. Can you tell me about some of the things that are in that that are good?

Deana.: Originally we have wanted to do Kale chips to go with it but it would've been considered two recipes. We thought the green was a really nice added color to the dish as again like Haley was saying in the presentation you want things to look nice. But I think the Swiss chard definitely makes it a little different and a little bit more original and that's a piece of this competition is to try to come up with original recipes.

Judy.: Connie how did you prepare the kids for this competition because there's going to be a lot of people there.

Connie.: Interestingly all four of the students participated in a summer cooking camp at our middle school. I've led the camp with them and most of them have also been in the family and consumer science classroom so they've had some formal preparation with kitchen safety and different techniques. But like Raven said all of them like to cook so they also do a lot of preparation at home. They came with a certain level of skills. And it was really nice to work with Chef Deana because she has formal chef training and she's taken all of our skills to the next step especially with cutting with the knives there can be safety precautions. All four students are very mature and very skilled so they're all a pleasure to work with.

Judy.: From your standpoint what did you get out of this experience as far as working with kids and preparing for this competition?

Deana.: I thought it was great to see how adventurous they were to try other foods. The other recipe that question had mentioned. They tested two. One of them was crepes. So the kids wanted to learn to make crepes. I thought that was great. Definitely how adventurous they were and they're ready to go and ready to compete.

Judy.: Let's bring the other iron chefs in here too. What you think, how has your experience been with this?

Natasha.: It has been very interesting and fun but most of all fun.

Judy.: What do your parents think about you being in this competition?

Raven.: They think it's a great opportunity for us.

Christian.: They love that I do it because one again they think it's a great opportunity and two if they're tired I can now make food for them.
Judy.: I think that's the best part about it. So what have you learned about food nutrition through all this?

Christian.: I have to say that food nutrition there some foods you can make really easily that are very nutritious it doesn't have to be all fancy laid out on a big platter to make it nutritious and good.

Judy.: What do you think about your peers in school if they were to see the panini on the menu? Do you think they would like to eat it?

Natasha.: Yes. They liked it a lot when they ate it.

Judy.: Oh really you made it for them?

Natasha.: Yes they loved it.

Judy.: Nice that raises the bar for school a little bit don't you think?

Connie.: It does. We did last Friday it was served in our Food Service line. We as a team didn't get to make it but a sandwich was made as if we're going to be made on the food Service line 50 sandwiches at a time. It was a little bit different but we have voting ballots counted those up in the majority of students liked it and we got numerous emails from staff members and teachers saying oh my goodness it was delicious we should do this again so that's really good to get the positive feedback from our school.

Judy.: That is really terrific because it shows people that nutritious food can be delicious as well which is the whole point.

Connie.: Yes our Food Service program is very supportive of our team.

Judy.: All right if you want to join the Colchester Crazy Cookers and the dozen other teams at the competition it is this Saturday March 24 starting at 9:30 a.m. at the Champlain Valley Expo Blue Ribbon Pavilion in Essex junction. Just a reminder that Junior Iron Chef Vermont is a statewide competition where students prepare original recipes use local farm fresh foods that are appropriate for serving in the school meal program. The event is open to the public. There is a $3.00 admission charge or $5.00 for family. For more information go to jrironchef.org on the web site to find the recipes for all the dishes that are prepared in the competition that of course includes the ultimate winter harvest cheddar panini. I think it's time for someone to cut that so I can taste it. Now this is the part that I've been looking forward to all morning long. Curling the fingers very nice. Crunch of the vegetables it looks delicious. Thank you all for joining us today and thanks for cooking for us kids. Thank you so much. That is our show for today, I'm Judy Simpson we will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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