

BY LISA KEATHLEY

Mix some young people, a good cause, and a competition. Stir in a few international spices, and what do you get? A winning recipe! Meet Kaitlyn Sam, Diana Camcho, and Aysha Waraich, winners of the fifth annual Real Food For Kids (RFFK) Feeding Academic Success Culinary Challenge. All three are high school students from Lake Braddock Secondary School in Burke, Va. Their team won the “Five Star” Award, the top honor in the March 11 competition that brought together 15 middle and high school teams from 10 Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS). At stake: The chance for a prized spot on the FCPS cafeteria menu. FCPS is the tenth largest school district in the country, so this was a prize worth fighting, er, cooking for!

The Guidelines ... Lots of Guidelines!

How did Kaitlyn, Diana, and Aysha do it? They, along with each of the teams, were given a list of rules to live by in creating their menus. Among the goals: Create a breakfast or lunch entree that was “delicious, appealing, meets federal nutritional guidelines, and can



L-R: Kaitlyn Sam; Toshieba Ragland, instructor; Diana Camcho; Aysha Waraich; and Thomas Prassa, instructor, reacting to the news of their win.

Photo: Laura Goyer, lauragoyer@me.com

Diversity Was an Inspiration!

The three aspiring restaurateurs started by looking around them. “Our school is very diverse,” said

panel of judges went from table to table to taste the culinary contenders. The judges were lead by celebrity chef judge Jamie Leeds, founder

staff to cook from scratch, bringing in many local farmers as vendors, installing salad bars in all 141 elementary schools, and setting up outdoor grills and rotisserie ovens for tastier chicken in high schools. “This event highlights the importance we place on our students to be change agents in service to putting delicious, high-quality food on our school menus,” Taylor said.

“The Expo gives attendees a taste of the kinds of initiatives that Real Food for Kids has been involved in over the past six years,” said RFFK’s JoAnn Hammermaster. “We organize fun and approachable ways to involve our community in nutrition and wellness education, and we work collaboratively and creatively with our school partners to help improve the food we serve our students.”

If you are a parent who wonders what your kids really eat at school, this is very good news! Healthy — and yummy — options at the same time! And if you were part of the 5-Star team whose recipe might end up on the Fairfax school menu, well, that’s a winning recipe, indeed!

Real Food for Kids ... And Communities, Too!

fit into the FCPS lunch program profile with consideration to cost.” The main dish had to include two to three units of meat or meat alternative, the vegetable side dish had to contain at least one cup of vegetables per serving, and the fruit side dish had to include at least 1/2 cup of fruit per serving. The entire meal had to feature between 750 and 850 calories, have fewer than ten percent calories from saturated fat and zero trans fat, and contain less than 1420 mg of sodium. Whew! These standards were difficult to meet. But JoAnne Hammermaster, co-founder and executive director of the nonprofit Real Food for Kids, said kids “are smart and have more sophisticated palates than many give them credit for.” And was she right!

Diana Camcho. “When we evaluated our current cafeteria selections, we realized that there were Chinese, Italian, and Mexican options on the menu, but there was not much from the Middle East.” Indeed, Lake Braddock High School students come from scores of countries and speak dozens of languages. Diana, Aysha, and Kaitlyn have a diverse backgrounds themselves, with parents from Pakistan, El Salvador, Mexico, China, and Cambodia. So with that in mind, they set out to develop a recipe that would be different but tasty — something they thought their friends would actually eat!

As each team displayed items ranging from chicken tortilla soup to a chicken gyro sandwich to enchiladas with chipotle sauce, a

of Hanks Oyster Bar and one of Washington’s most highly recognized chefs. The winning entry: A three-course meal that included a very tasty shawarma chicken wrap. Judges scored this entry with 473 out of a possible 500 points. Dr. Becky Bays, a judge and Loudoun County Public Schools’ Food and Nutrition Services Director, asked for the chicken spice blend recipe after declaring “ooh, that’s good!”

The Larger Goal: Healthier Goods in Schools

The Culinary Competition and Wellness Expo kicked off with a keynote address by FCPS Food and Nutrition Director Rodney Taylor, who is trying to revolutionize school food in the 198 schools and centers he oversees. With support from Real Food for Kids, he is training kitchen