



A Recipe



FOR SUCCESS

BY LISA M. SCHMELZ
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLLY LEITNER
UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED



FOR MANY TEENS, successful cooking is usually accomplished by following the directions on a box of Kraft Easy Mac®. The no-boil cheesy pasta needs only water and three minutes in the microwave — perfect for the multi-tasking teen who is simultaneously cramming for finals, texting a pal and watching the latest reality show on TV.

But some teens are more discriminating. They've learned that really good meals usually require time, technique and tenderness. Such is the case for Kendall Kelly, Clayton Maricle, Jessica Bania and Michael Pane. As members of an elite culinary team at Badger High School in Lake Geneva, this fab-four took home first place in a national high school competition late last spring, out-braising and out-sautéing teams from 35 other states. In addition to capturing the

top prize, each team member took home a \$5,000 scholarship and immediately began fielding scholarship offers from some of the nation's top culinary schools.

Led by Russ Tronsen, 31, a family and consumer education teacher, the team had only 60 minutes to prepare a gourmet meal at the National ProStart Invitational in San Diego, sponsored by the National Restaurant Association. Making this culinary competition even more difficult was the fact that they had only a 10-by-10-foot space to work in and just two butane burners on which to cook. Still, none of these limitations stopped this foursome from creating a menu that would wow diners with five-star taste buds.

"It was a very down-to-the-minute menu this year," recalls Tronsen. "There was not a

whole lot of extra wiggle room. We literally took our hands off the finished plates at the buzzer. It was down to the wire."

Down to the wire, but worth it.

For starters, the Badger team served gazpacho soup in hand-carved cucumber cups, a lobster salad with apple and fennel and a knuckle sandwich with fresh Maine lobsters. The entrée featured a braised veal shank with a cranberry and red wine reduction, accompanied by caramelized onion mashed potatoes, and a vegetable medley of morel mushrooms, snap peas, carrots and ramps (a wild-grown leek). Dessert was vanilla bean cannelloni with an egg-free lemon curd meringue and mascarpone cheese, served on a plate of painted chocolate and raspberry coulis.

Each featured dish was a collection of multiple recipes, in some cases as many as a dozen. Absolutely everything was made fresh and from scratch. For months, the team devoted every spare minute they had to practicing for the competition. They were mentored along the way by local chefs Danell Craig of 3D Cakes, David Ross of Lake Lawn Resort, and Ken Hnilo of Gilbert's — where all four of the teens also work part-time.





Moving about in such close quarters, with no help from Tronsen — as it was forbidden by the competition's rule — the team looked like a cross between the New York City Ballet and the German Army. Every member of the team had an exact role to perform.

Overseeing the starters was Bania, now a senior. Near-disaster struck, she recalls, when a box of the team's equipment was lost in transport. Many of the dishes they planned to prepare, she explains, required the use of a hand-cranked blender. Nothing else would do.

"We spent the whole first night looking for this blender and other equipment in San Diego," she says. "It was very stressful. Everything you could think of went wrong, but we pulled through. It's good that we had to go through these struggles because it showed we can get through difficult things and figure stuff out."

Maricle, now a freshman on scholarship at the University of Wisconsin at Stout (where he plans to major in food science and education), oversaw the preparation of the veal shank. "It's either done perfectly or it's not done at all. If we hit it on the head, we were going to be in great shape. But if not, we were going to drag down the rest of the team," he says of the demanding dish, which included a delicate blend of liquids that would not only braise the meat but also form a nearly done sauce.

Kelly — currently a freshman attending the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, on scholarship — was in charge

Their culinary workouts, which were timed and tasted, were grueling and exacting. In addition to making sure they could prepare their menu under the Spartan conditions at the competition, the team also had to figure out how to prepare a braised veal shank in the time allowed. Normally, a classic dish like this would require three hours. But with their mentor chefs and Tronsen, the team paved the way to innovation by using a pressure cooker to braise the veal in just 47 minutes — a feat that had the judges quite impressed.



All smiles after winning the National ProStart Invitational are (left to right) Russ Tronsen, Kendall Kelly, Michael Pane, Clayton Maricle and Jessica Bania. PHOTO COURTESY OF RUSS TRONSEN.

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Kendall Kelly's Dark Chocolate Cookies

Kelly is a self-confessed chocoholic. Here, she shares a recipe she's experimented with this past year, tweaking it until she got it just right. This dark chocolate cookie is soft in the center and crispy on the outside.

- $\frac{3}{4}$ c. all-purpose flour
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c. Dutch processed cocoa powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ sticks unsalted butter, softened
- 1 c. sugar
- 2 eggs
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. vanilla

Preheat the oven to 375°. Combine flour, cocoa, baking soda and salt in a bowl and set aside. Cream butter and sugar with an electric mixer until pale and fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, and then the vanilla until just combined. Add the flour mixture slowly then mix until just together. (Do not over-mix, otherwise, says Kelly, "you'll have yucky cookies.") Drop dough in level 2-teaspoon amounts about two inches apart on an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake for 13 minutes.

Chocolate Guinness Cake

This is a recipe that's been in Kendall Kelly's family for years. Sometimes, she prepares this in cupcake form and shaves Ghirardelli bittersweet chocolate onto the iced cupcakes as a garnish. To do this, simply use the largest side of your cheese grater, which will provide you with curled shavings.

- 1 c. Irish Stout Guinness Beer
- 1 stick plus 2 tbsp. butter cut into pieces
- 2 c. granulated sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c. unsweetened cocoa (any brand is fine)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c. sour cream
- 2 eggs
- 3 tbsp. vanilla
- 2 c. all-purpose flour
- $2\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. baking soda

Heat the oven to 350°. Combine flour and baking soda, mix well and set aside. To get the right amount of Guinness for this recipe, you'll need to pour it down the side of the measuring cup to lessen the foam. Pour the beer and butter into a medium saucepan and stir over medium heat, melting the butter. This usually takes four minutes. Whisk in the sugar and cocoa and remove from heat. It should be smooth. In a separate bowl, beat together the sour cream, eggs and vanilla until light in color, then add in the beer-butter mixture. Fold in the flour and baking soda mixture and beat until it's just combined. Pour the batter into a nine-inch cake pan and bake for about 45 minutes, testing center of cake for doneness. Allow the cake to cool before icing it.

- Icing:
- 18 oz. pkg. cream cheese softened (do not use fat-free or light varieties)
 - $1\frac{1}{4}$ c. confectioner's sugar
 - $\frac{1}{2}$ c. heavy whipping cream

Beat the cream cheese until it's smooth then sift the confectioner's sugar over the cream cheese until it's combined. Then add in the cream and beat with a mixer on a low speed until it's soft enough to spread.

Italian Fish Salad

Michael Pane is now a senior at Badger High and his family prepares this dish every Christmas Eve as an Italian holiday tradition. The recipe started with his grandmother. Some of the ingredients are pricey and can be found only at seafood markets, specialty stores or online, but Pane says this salad is well worth the price and hunt.

- $1\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. calamari body
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. shrimp, peeled and de-veined
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. lump crabmeat, warmed
- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- $1\frac{3}{4}$ c. celery, minced
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ c. green olives
- 1 c. black olives, pitted
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c. fresh lemon juice
- $\frac{3}{4}$ c. olive oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$ c. fresh parsley leaves, minced

In a saucepan of boiling water, cook the calamari and shrimp for three minutes or just until tender. In a large bowl, combine the calamari, shrimp, crab, garlic, celery and olives. Add salt and pepper to taste. Then chill the seafood mixture until ready to serve. To prepare dressing, whisk together in a small bowl: lemon juice, olive oil, and salt and pepper to taste. Before serving, add the dressing to the chilled seafood mixture and toss to combine. Garnish with the fresh parsley.

of the dessert. Pane assisted each of his teammates in one way or another and spent considerable time with Maricle, ensuring the veal turned out perfectly.

"It felt really good," says Pane of hearing the team won first place. "I was shocked at first because we had a lot of things go wrong, so we just weren't sure how things were going to turn out."

Kelly and the entire team believe they wouldn't be where they are now without Tronsen. "He got us here," explains Kelly. "He spent countless hours getting this all together. He got mentors for us — and we couldn't have done this without our mentors — but he also just spent a lot of time with us... We never could have done this without him."

Now in his ninth year of teaching at Badger High, Tronsen has built a highly regarded culinary program at the school. For the last three years, his teams have held first-place state titles and have been competing nationally. He is quick, though, to deflect praise for this year's first national win and immediately puts the focus back on his young charges. Gourmet cooking, he says, is about more than following recipes. It's about something much deeper.

"Obviously, they had really good instincts," he says of his team. "A lot of kids sometimes are excited to do something, but when something goes wrong, they don't have the foresight to overcome the pitfalls. But these kids did. 🚩"



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