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Bonita Unified ProStart Student Chefs Bring Home Top Prizes at Culinary Clash

SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE – Two Bonita Unified ProStart culinary students demonstrated their prowess in the kitchen, whipping up gastronomic delights for attendees of the California Restaurant Foundation’s (CRF) annual Culinary Clash fundraiser and walking away with top prizes during the event, which raised more than \$90,000 for culinary arts programs in California public high schools.

Bonita High School rising senior Charli Padilla won the Golden Plate Award for best presentation and San Dimas High School Class of 2024 graduate Kiana Conway won the Culinary Perfect Puree Champ Award for best use of a sponsor product. This is the second consecutive year that Bonita Unified ProStart students have taken home top awards at the Culinary Clash, held this year on June 7 at the Coca-Cola headquarters in Irvine, and continues a long tradition of BUSD students honing their skills over the summer in the competition.

CRF’s Culinary Clash pairs up-and-coming ProStart student sous chefs with ProStart sponsor restaurant executives. Working with industry mentors, Padilla, who teamed up with Wienerschnitzel, and Conway, who worked with Wedgewood Weddings, had three months to create original recipes that combined their ProStart training, skills, and moxie with a mix of required ingredients.

Both Padilla and Conway had to prepare for the cooking contest while navigating their end-of-year studies. For Conway, it meant finding time when she was not working on her senior project, playing with the San Dimas High band, taking finals and preparing for graduation. Padilla had to prepare while also serving as captain of the Bonita High 2024 ProStart National Competition team.

Padilla worked with her mentor to present a menu that included a handcrafted opal basil cappelletti pasta stuffed with Australian lamb striploin and marinated in blood orange puree and Coke; ricotta cheese mixed with rice vinegar; and a veggie blend with hon shimeji mushrooms toasted in an opal basil and sage brown butter sauce.

This is the second consecutive year Padilla has taken home a Culinary Clash award, after winning the Mentor of the Year award with Outback Steakhouse in 2023.

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“This year’s Culinary Clash gave me a whole new perspective of what it takes to execute a dish and plan for a large event,” Padilla said. “There is so much work going on behind the scenes and the pressure is on. I cherish the opportunity to work with Wienerschnitzel’s Research and Development team, and the insights and connections they have provided me. I couldn’t be more grateful!”

Conway created a menu that included braised lamb barbacoa street tacos with Asian pear kimchi and shishito pepper crema; braised Wagyu pork carnitas with an Asian pear slaw and pineapple ginger crema; and a black angus carne asada with Asian pear pico de gallo and avocado Asian basil crema.

“The Culinary Clash was a super fun experience for me as I got the opportunity to work one-on-one with a chef for the first time ever, and discover what it would be like working in a professional industry kitchen,” Conway said. “It was eye-opening for me, and I can’t thank Chef Kevin from Wedgewood Weddings enough for letting me work with them. It was a great way to end my year at San Dimas.”

Conway plans to attend Napa Valley College and study culinary arts, then transfer to San Diego State University.

“The Culinary Clash is challenging on so many levels, this year it brought extra pressure and time management concerns for Charli and Kiana. It forced them not to procrastinate and get on with their project,” Bonita High School ProStart instructor Laurie Brandler said. “They handled it like complete professionals and I couldn’t be prouder of them. We are creating a culture of high expectations for our ProStart students, led by our very talented and capable student chefs.”

PHOTO CAPTIONS:

BUSD_2024_CULINARYCLASH1: San Dimas High School Class of 2024 graduate Kiana Conway and Bonita High School senior Charli Padilla celebrate after taking top honors at the California Restaurant Foundation’s annual Culinary Clash fundraiser on June 7 at Coca-Cola Headquarters in Irvine.

BUSD_2024_CULINARYCLASH2: Bonita High School senior Charli Padilla works with her Team Wienerschnitzel mentor Kimberly Zupfer during the California Restaurant Foundation’s annual Culinary Clash fundraiser. Padilla won the Golden Plate Award for best presentation of her menu.

BUSD_2024_CULINARYCLASH3: San Dimas High School Class of 2024 graduate Kiana Conway presents street tacos created with a Wedgewood Weddings mentor during the California Restaurant Foundation’s Culinary Clash. Conway won the Perfect Puree Award for best use of a sponsor product.

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