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## **Bonita Unified's Chaparral-Vista Culinary Students Triumph Again in District Chili Cook-Off**

**SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE** – When Chaparral-Vista High School culinary students began the semester, they thought they would simply be taking notes and honing their basic skills before moving on to preparing restaurant-quality dishes as the year progressed. What they did not know was that they would immediately be assigned to create a pot of chili that could compete with the best recipes in the District.

The students were up to the task and the Chaparral-Vista culinary program once again shocked judges, contestants, and chili lovers alike by winning first-place in the third annual Bonita PTA Council Chili Cook-Off, held in September. Chaparral-Vista students also won the inaugural cook-off in 2022, and have now earned their second “golden ladle” to place on their culinary Wall of Champions.

For first-year Chaparral-Vista culinary instructors Cristina Cortez and Miriam Marascola, the chili cook-off victory proves that great things can be accomplished if students work together as a team, even if they are novices in the kitchen.

“We are so proud of our students,” Cortez said. “Our program is student-run, so the team got together and assigned kitchen roles on their own and did their own research, experimenting, and taste-testing. Before they came into the class, most of them had never even chopped a vegetable before. Now they know how to make an award-winning bowl of chili.”

The student culinary team tried a few different recipes at first, with mixed results. Then Chaparral-Vista junior Demitri Romanowski asked his mother if she would be willing to pass along the recipe for her own homemade chili. Even though the recipe is a cherished family secret, Romanowski’s mom gave her blessing, and the team got to work.

“When I heard we were doing chili, I remembered my mom had a great recipe,” Romanowski said. “I brought it to the class and it was pretty unanimous that it was the best recipe we had. There was a lot of pressure, as this was my first time cooking. But Ms. Cortez and Ms. Marascola encourage cooperation and organization, and that helped the process go smoothly.”

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Even though the team felt they had the perfect recipe, they divvied up the chili and continued to experiment with different spices and flavorings. In the end, mom's original recipe was judged the best, with no substitutions.

Not content with just a tasty bowl of chili, the students tested several different recipes for cornbread, using various sweeteners. Chaparral-Vista senior Marissa Hernandez's cornbread recipe, made with brown sugar, was the team's favorite and was served alongside the chili at the cook-off.

"What I love about culinary class is that we do hands-on activities all the time, and get to work independently at our own pace," Hernandez said. "I joined the class because I like cooking and baking, so I appreciate learning how to use a knife and improving my chopping skills. I was shocked we won the contest, but we put in a lot of hard work to make the best bowl of chili that we could."

The winning chili cook-off team also included Chaparral-Vista students Luis Castro, Alexis Avelar-Rojas, Ashley Torres, Sofia Bejarano, Joseph Lopez, Jake Lopez-Giraldo, and Brandon Rodriguez, with additional guidance from instructional aide Quicha Dotson.

Chaparral-Vista's culinary program is a two-year pathway with beginning and advanced courses. Students learn essential kitchen skills and work towards earning their ServSafe certifications, which are required of all food handlers in California.

Throughout the year, culinary students will meet with guest speakers such as a Wells Fargo Bank representative – who will impart life skills guidance and financial tips – and take field trips to SoCal Edison, to prepare a meal in the Edison kitchen using industry-standard equipment, and FreshPoint Southern California, to learn about food safety and participate in a Q&A with FreshPoint executives.

### PHOTOS:

**BUSD\_CULINARY\_CHILI1:** Chaparral-Vista High School students Sofia Bejarano and Alexis Avelar-Rojas prep ingredients in the school's culinary class. Both students were part of the team that won Bonita Council PTA's Chili Cook-off in September.

**BUSD\_CULINARY\_CHILI2:** (From left to right) Chaparral-Vista High School culinary students Sofia Bejarano, Demitri Romanowski, Marissa Hernandez, Alexis Avelar-Rojas, and Luis Castro celebrate their first-place finish in the Bonita Council PTA's third annual Chili Cook-Off. Not pictured: chili cook-off team members and Chaparral-Vista students Joseph Lopez, Jake Lopez-Giraldo, Brandon Rodriguez, and Ashley Torres.

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