

Culinary contest winner is chef for a day

by Cindy Yoshiyama

With two hours and a handful of watchful executive chefs examining his every move, calm, cool and collected 17-year-old James Anderson whipped up a meal fit for a king.

In order to succeed in New York Food Company's "Iron Chef"-style culinary contest, which required him to apply his cooking skills under the real-world time constraints professional chefs face, the Redondo Union High School senior knew every minute was crucial in planning the three-course menu he created.

First, he prepared dessert, a raspberry crème brûlée, mixing the sugar, egg yolks, cream and vanilla beans early to make sure it would have enough time to chill while he worked on the appetizer, a chunky avocado salad with blue corn chips, blending cilantro, lime and spicy Serrano chilies.

Then, with a mixed green salad at its side, he cooked the main course, a honey lime grilled chicken with spiced roasted tomatoes.

In the end, Anderson was declared the winner, after competing against two other local high school students for the grand prize: a \$500 scholarship he will use toward the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco and the opportunity to be the chef for a day at Verandas restaurant in Manhattan Beach.

"It's been surreal to show what I can really do and get honored for it," Anderson said. "It hasn't hit me yet. It's what I know best. Whenever I make something, I try to excite the palate."

With two NYFC executive chefs as his "assistants," Anderson



James Anderson, the winner of New York Food Company's High School Culinary Contest, above right, prepares his raspberry crème brûlée with the assistance of NYFC executive chefs Larry Flentie and Steve O'Connor for the 100 attendees of the Manhattan Beach Coordinating Council's meeting May 19 at Verandas restaurant.

(photo by Chris Miller)

had the opportunity to cook a gourmet meal for 100 people attending the Manhattan Beach Coordinating Council's meeting May 19.

The idea behind the contest began with NYFC vice president Jim Wharton, who was looking to give a deserving youngster the chance to demonstrate his or her talents in the culinary arts.

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Student chef

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"We wanted students to know what it feels like to be a chef for a day," said Michael Limas, director of corporate development for NYFC. "We don't know of any other program that offers this kind of opportunity."

The contest was open to juniors and seniors at 12 South Bay high schools and required an essay, two letters of recommendation, and a recipe for a hot entrée and either an appetizer, soup or salad or dessert. Submissions were judged on taste, concept and presentation.

The three finalists competed at the NYFC corporate kitchen in El Segundo. NYFC operates upward of 700 weddings a year at La Venta Inn in Palos Verdes Estates, the Catalina Room in Rancho Palos Verdes and Verandas.

Ever since his parents trusted him with a knife, Anderson was in the kitchen, experimenting with ingredients and using his family as his guinea pigs. His first dish was a potato dumpling soup.

While on the wrestling team in his freshman year, he inspired a teammate to change to a healthier diet and later helped to develop the school's first cardio center.

He said his specialty is California cuisine, but is looking to branch out in college.

"I blame the Food Channel," Anderson said of his inspirations. "I'll see something I like and think I need to try that. I'm not sure how I got into more exotic foods. I just want to do the best I can and see where that takes me."

In his essay for the contest, Anderson said food paints a picture and that it is his goal to stimulate all of the senses. To continue his education in the culinary arts he will also travel to Bordeaux, France, for a month to learn about the food in that region.

Larry Flentie, an NYFC chef who catered for John Kerry during his campaign in Southern California, said he was struck by Anderson's passion for food.

"James' concept about the pairing of foods and blending of flavors is what got him here," Flentie said. "I was very impressed with his effort and I think we'll be seeing a lot out of him."