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CONTACT: Lauren Creiman, (909) 833-9853

Bonita Unified Students Win California ProStart Cup, Advance to National Culinary Competition

SAN DIMAS/LA VERNE – Bonita Unified School District will represent California at the National ProStart Invitational for the second year in a row after Bonita High School students wowed judges with their culinary flair and captured first place at the California Restaurant Foundation’s 2024 California ProStart Cup, held Feb. 21 to 22 in Long Beach.

Bonita High School’s culinary team “Chicks” – which consists of captain Charli Padilla, team manager Laura Mangiafreno, and members Nicolas Caballero, Cameron Turoci, and Michael Vera – had just 60 minutes to create a three-course meal on two butane burners during the Culinary Cup. “Chicks” earned top marks for their elegant menu, featuring an appetizer of raviolo doppio, a pan-seared elk tenderloin entrée, and a layered mascarpone mousse entremet.

“Our team’s keys to success were simple; we prioritized originality and honest communication, and we’re blessed to be supported by a fantastic program,” said Padilla, who was also awarded a year-long externship with Specialty Restaurants Corporation following the competition. “I cannot express how strong my team truly is; every run-through was a challenge to become our best selves.”

This is Bonita High School’s first time advancing the nationals, which will be held April 26 to 28 in Baltimore, and the first time a Bonita Unified team has placed first in the Culinary Cup. San Dimas High School took first in the Management Cup – in which students pitch a new restaurant concept, complete with a menu, marketing plan, and detailed design – and then placed third at nationals in 2023. Last year marked the first time in more than 10 years that a California team placed in the top five at nationals.

“For Bonita Unified to head to nationals two years in a row, and to be the best team in California in restaurant management and now culinary, is an amazing feeling for us,” Bonita High School culinary instructor Laurie Brandler said. “We are incredibly grateful to have the support of our district, which understands our vision for the program and the value it provides for students.”

San Dimas High School students also excelled at this year’s ProStart Cup, despite entering the contests at a disadvantage after being displaced from their culinary classroom during the fall semester as it was renovated. The culinary team, “Capybaras That Cook,” placed fourth in the Culinary Cup.

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San Dimas High students Gabriel Costa and Austin Garcia took first and third, respectively, in the “Dress Your Dog” competition, and Christina Jones took first place in the Loaded Idaho Potato competition – both of which tasked competitors with creating inventive toppings for their respective items.

Costa’s winning concoction featured a teriyaki glazed hotdog wrapped in seaweed, topped with fresh avocado, cucumber ribbons, sriracha mayo drizzle, and sesame dressed microgreens. Jones won over the judges with a twist on a mango sticky rice dessert, featuring Idaho potatoes served with a drizzle of mango-infused syrup, and sprinkled with toasted coconut flakes and moong daal.

ProStart is an industry-backed culinary arts and restaurant management program for high school students coordinated by the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation. The Bonita Unified ProStart culinary program is helmed by husband-and-wife duo Nick and Laurie Brandler, who teach the nationally recognized program at San Dimas High and Bonita High, respectively.

“We emphasize to our students that this is one culinary program that spans two schools, and we’re here to support one another and help each other grow,” Nick Brandler said. “In our District, students are going to get an excellent culinary experience no matter what school they go to. When one BUSD team wins, we all win.”

Many Bonita Unified students have gone on to culinary school or to work in the culinary and hospitality industries, empowered by the hands-on learning experiences they received in the ProStart program, and have even mentored current students during ProStart competitions, field trips and internships.

“My favorite thing about the Prostart program is the exposure it provides of the restaurant industry,” Padilla said. “I’ve gotten the opportunity to work with some of the most talented people I’ve ever met and am beyond lucky to have them alongside me as we all continue our journey into the culinary field.”

PHOTOS:

BUSD_BHS_PROSTART1: Bonita High School culinary students and their coaches celebrate their first-place win at the California ProStart Cup, held Feb. 21 and 22 in Long Beach. The team, “Chicks,” will represent California at the National ProStart Invitational in April.

BUSD_BHS_PROSTART2: Cheered on by San Dimas High School students and culinary instructor Nick Brandler, Bonita High School culinary instructor Laurie Brandler and her students are overcome with emotion as they are named the winners of the Culinary Cup at the California ProStart Cup.

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