

Leap of Faith

At the IKA, the United States fields a seasoned national team that dares to be different.

By Kay Orde

When members of ACF Culinary National Team USA compete in the International Culinary Art Competition (IKA) in Erfurt, Germany, this month, they take with them this advice from Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC, ACF Culinary Team USA manager and national team member: "Those who do not take risks when they step into the arena neither enjoy much nor learn much, because

they live in a black-and-white world that knows neither winning nor losing."

The team, of course, hopes it will win this international culinary competition, widely believed to be the most prestigious in the world. But team members are also familiar with a fiercely held belief about culinary competitions, and one they subscribe to—the education that comes from being a team member is invaluable. It has been likened to 10 years of industry experience, and the

process of constantly learning alongside similarly driven fellow chefs means that everyone becomes better at what they do.

Meet the risk-takers

With the confidence that comes from learning and growing comes the ability, Leonard believes, to take risks. So, how much risk will the team take as it defends its 2004 World Champion in hot-food cookery title? Will that tried-and-true path to success work a second time?

Left to right, Jamie Keating, Richard Rosendale, Joachim Buchner, Edward Leonard, Mellisa Root and Daniel Scannell represent the United States at the IKA.



"We still focus on real food that has great flavor, is seasonal and has harmony in the flavor profiles," Leonard says. "We have, however, raised the bar. We have worked hard to develop a new presentation style that is streamlined and uses geometric flow on the plates along with modern cookery techniques.

"It is a slight risk, but the whole purpose of a competition at this level is to raise the bar and showcase the new trends and new profiles used in the top kitchens today. With risk comes reward, so we will see."

The players on the national team are poised to make that risk pay off. They are willing to embrace, if not exactly a new direction, one that has an interesting diversion. And they are eminently qualified for the job. Leonard, executive chef at Westchester Country Club in Rye, N.Y., has more than 20 years of IKA experience. For Daniel Scannell, CMC, executive chef at Carnegie Abbey Club in Portsmouth, R.I., this is his third IKA. Joachim Buchner, CMC, executive chef at Chevy Chase Club in Chevy Chase, Md., was a member of the 2004 team that earned World Champion status. Also a member of that team, Richard Rosendale, CEC, chef/owner of Rosendales in Columbus, Ohio, serves as the present team's captain.

Jamie Keating, chef/owner of Gourmet Events in Columbus, Ga., is new to the national team but was a member of ACF Culinary Regional Team USA and competed at the IKA in 2004. Mellisa Root, consulting pastry chef at

Westchester Country Club, Rye, N.Y., and the newest member of the national team, was on the U.S. team that earned gold and silver medals at the American Culinary Classic held at the 2007 National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show.

Up to the challenge

A competition that pits a country's best chefs against their counterparts from 31 other nations calls for innovative ways of staying in the game. Once the team arrives in Erfurt, it will have a week to prepare for the IKA. Leonard says teams don't have the luxury of holding practice

Game plan

Two regional teams and a youth team are competing under the ACF Culinary Team USA banner at the IKA in Erfurt. Meet these up-and-coming culinarians who are poised to perform at the top of their game.

ACF Culinary Regional Team USA

Drew Garms, sous chef, Rosendales, Columbus, Ohio; Jennifer Kopp, CEPC, executive pastry chef, Chevy Chase Club, Chevy Chase, Md.; Joseph Leonardi, CEC, executive chef, Somerset Club, Boston; Michael Matarazzo, team captain, senior sous chef, Westchester Country Club, Rye, N.Y.; Timothy Prefontaine, CSC, executive chef, The Fort Worth Club, Fort Worth, Texas. Team manager: Edward Leonard, CMC, AAC

AAC Culinary Regional Team USA

Loan Co, assistant pastry chef, San Francisco Marriott, San Francisco; Christopher Desens, CEC, AAC, executive chef, The Racquet Club Ladue, St. Louis;

Scott Fetty, chef-instructor, Pennsylvania Culinary Institute, Pittsburgh; Daryl Shular, corporate executive chef, PFG-Milton's, Oakwood, Ga.; Randy Torres, department chair, culinary arts, Professional Culinary Institute, Campbell, Calif. Team manager: Jill Bosich, CEC, CCE, AAC, instructor, Orange Coast College, Costa Mesa, Calif., owner, Cowgirl Cookie Co., Newport Beach, Calif.

ACF Culinary Youth Team USA

Michael Bush, Old Warson Country Club, St. Louis; Michael Palazzola, Old Warson Country Club; Kevin Taylor Jr., St. Louis Country Club, St. Louis; Wayne Sieve, The Racquet Club Ladue, St. Louis; John Gelineau, Bellerive Country Club, St. Louis. Team manager: Steven Jilleba, CMC, CCE, AAC, corporate executive chef, Unilever Foodsolutions, Lisle, Ill. Coaches: Paul Kampff, CEC, executive chef, St. Louis Country Club; Aidan P. Murphy, CMC, AAC, executive chef, Old Warson Country Club; Kevin Storm, CEC, executive chef, Bellerive Country Club

sessions, as they are just working hard to make sure they have everything in place for the competition kitchen. But Team USA's national team will have one final run-through before they compete.

"Our biggest challenge will be our hot-food lunch at the hotel two days after we arrive in Erfurt," Leonard says. "This is a huge undertaking, but it gives us a last hot-food run before the big day."

Why this extra pressure on the team so close to the competition? "We did this in 2004, as well, and it was not easy," Leonard says. "But it gave us a chance to do the menu one more time, work in a tight space and also get used to the products we have to use, which can be quite different in Germany than in the United States. But this exercise will really help us with any last-minute adjustments and keep us ready to compete."

Other challenges come from competing in a foreign country, but Leonard says the team is fortunate because most of them are repeat IKA competitors.

"This isn't the first time we've competed in Erfurt—some of us have been several times—and that's a big help," he says. "In some ways, it is like a home away from home for me. I visit often, and have many colleagues and professional friends in Germany. This helps overcome some of the challenges, such as where to find the ingredients and supplies that we need for our program, and how to overcome language barriers and

working in environments that use metric measurements, as well."

But teams must also bring with them certain items, and one of the biggest obstacles could well be dealing with the airlines and security, as well as new rules for luggage and what can be taken on the plane.

Coping mechanisms

Is it possible to prepare, physically, mentally and emotionally, for this kind of major competition, a once-every-four-years chance to show the world your country's best, most innovative culinary creations?

"For us, it all comes down to discipline," Leonard says. "All of us are working chefs who cook daily in the kitchen, which really helps the physical part, especially working behind the line. Mentally, we know the pressure we are under and the expectations that are on us and what we need to do. But our focus is steady, and we are dedicated to doing our best and giving 110%. After that, it's in the hands of the judges. Emotionally, it all comes together when you get there and enter the great hall. Then you step into the kitchen and your adrenaline kicks in, and you gear up to cook like you've never cooked before.

"We hope and expect that the IKA will be a great show, and that the jury will be open and looking for modern techniques and the highest level of craftsmanship that can be expected from a national team."

Despite the pressure, Team USA's national team is looking forward to the experience. "The enjoyment comes

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from the excitement of being there to showcase your talent, compete against the best and try to achieve your goals," Leonard says. "What those who come to watch the competition will enjoy is not part of us and what we are here for. Total focus is demanded of us so that we are in the moment and cooking to win."

And Leonard's final piece of advice to the team? "It is far better, in the heat of competition, to dare and do mighty things that differ from the norm. To raise the bar and have the courage to do it differently than anyone else is truly a glorious triumph."