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Mayors cooked

Six towns represented in third annual Mayors Healthy Cook-Off
BY KATHY CHANG Staff Writer

Seven mayors from across the state left state Sen. Joseph F. Vitale (D- 19), former New York Giants wide receiver Stephen Baker, also known as "the Touchdown Maker," and WCTC radio's The Restaurant Guys- Mark Pascal and Francis Schott - with full and happy stomachs as they judged each dish during the Mayors Healthy Cook-Off at the Wegmans supermarket last week.



PHOTOS BY MATT DENTON Woodbridge Mayor John E. McCormac readies his salmon for the grill as his assistant, Karen McMullen, an executive chef at Wegmans supermarket, assists him at the Woodbridge Mayors Healthy Cook-Off held at the supermarket in Woodbridge on May 7. The mayor prepared a cedar-plank salmon with brown sugar and cracked pepper blend.

The cook-off is the third event; the first and second events were held in Parsippany and West Deptford.

"We should do this quarterly," said Vitale, which brought laughter to the other judges as they finished their last dish of the competition (chicken piccata with chardonnay wine made by former Harrison Township Mayor Mike Koestler).

The seven mayors - Woodbridge Mayor John E. McCormac, Pennington Mayor Anthony Persichilli, North Brunswick Mayor Francis Womack, Clark Township Mayor Salvatore Bonaccorso, Nutley Mayor Joanne Cocchiola, and Koestler - participated in the cutthroat competition to see who could prepare the most healthful dish as part of the Mayors' Wellness Campaign's effort to promote healthier living and more active lifestyles.



Danny Cardona, 9, reacts with excitement as former New York Giants wide receiver Stephen Baker, also known as "the Touchdown Maker," signs his football. His sister, Teresa, 11, looks on. Baker was one of the judges during the cook-off.

The Mayors' Wellness Campaign is an initiative of the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute in partnership with the New Jersey State League of Municipalities.

Major funding was provided by Aetna.

The campaign supports mayors as champions of community health. The goal is to increase opportunities for New Jersey residents to participate in daily physical activity with a long-term goal of reducing health-care costs secondary to obesity. Through public and private partnerships, the campaign provides structure and resources for healthy community initiatives.

McCormac addressed the 50 or so people, including Councilman Gregg Ficarra, who is the head of the township's wellness campaign, Councilman James Major, Councilwoman Patricia Osborne, Jeff Zirpolo, owner of the Club at Woodbridge, other members of the club, and members of the Woodbridge YMCA, who came to watch the intense competition and to support the mayors on May 7.

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"This is not fair," McCormac said. "I am Irish, and our idea of a [healthful meal] is boiling six potatoes in a pot. I'm competing with Mayor Salvatore Bonaccorso, Mayor Anthony Persichilli, Mayor Joanne Cocchiola... I give up- the winner of the cook-off will be a last name ending in a vowel, and they will definitely beat me."

McCormac's comments brought laughter to the crowd.

The mayors, in chef hats and aprons, spent a half-hour or so preparing their meals in the Wegmans kitchen with executive chefs from the supermarket supervising them.

Then the mayors presented their meals to the four judges.

McCormac prepared a cedar-plank salmon with brown sugar and cracked pepper blend.

"It's great that [McCormac] has highlighted a healthy Wegmans dish for the cook-off," said Judy Doyle, director of the Mayors' Wellness Campaign.

Bonaccorso, who has been mayor of Clark for eight years, picked his special summertime salad, which included a large head of romaine lettuce, one pound of crabmeat, a half pound of lobster and a dozen large shrimp.

"I chose my summertime salad because we are close to the summer time ... it's simple, tasty, and enjoyable," he said. "I cook as a hobby, it's a lot of fun ... it's my meditation."

Bonaccorso's summertime salad won for best presentation.

Cocchiola, with the help of Tarik Huggins, culinary arts instructor at Nutley High School, and five of his students, prepared a raw zucchini salad, a chickpea salad with poached tuna, and lemon basil sorbet, which was all topped off with a pomegranate limeade.

"I sat with Tarik and he helped me create a healthy yet delicious meal," said Cocchiola, who added that the students were selected as contest winners of the school's Iron Chef competition. "We worked as a great team."

Cocchiola's meal won for being the most nutritious.

Persichilli prepared a dish of whole wheat pasta with turkey sausage and broccoli rabe.

"I'm trying the dish with the turkey sausage for the first time," Persichilli said as he boiled the pasta. "I usually use regular meat sausage, but we are here to cook a healthy dish, so we'll see how it works out."

Persichilli's meal won for best-tasting dish.

Koestler, who participated in the North and South Jersey cook-offs, with the help of his brother Pat prepared a chicken piccata dish, which was topped off with chardonnay wine.

"We picked the dish we picked because we came here with the intent to win," said Koestler, who added silverware, lit candles, and flowers to the place settings. "Chicken is extremely healthy. I cook a wide variety of dishes at home, from the chicken dish to steak."

Koestler's meal and display won him the best overall presentation, most nutritious and best-tasting dish of the competition.

Womack could not make the event, but his wife, son, and a councilwoman attended the event in his place. They prepared the mayor's healthful meatball soup, which included beef bouillon, six slices of dry or toasted white bread, and bread bowls.

Doyle said they decided to descend on Woodbridge for the event because the township has shown an abundance of programs to curb obesity.

"There are so many programs that stand out for the youths, seniors, employees, and community," she said. "Mayor McCormac has been leading the charge in fighting

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obesity within his community. We hold two events a year and try to highlight different locations for north, south, and central New Jersey. This is our Central Jersey event."

Ficarra said that as part of the Mayors' Wellness Campaign, the township is expected to hold a historic 39.4-mile bike ride throughout the township this fall.

"We are committed to the health of the community and working on making the township a bike-able, walkable and easily navigated township," he said.

Doyle said the wellness campaign is amazing and unique.

"What more could we do to embrace and entice more people in the community than utilize the mayors?" she said. "Out of the 566 mayors in the state, we have 230 mayors committed to the campaign, which is 46 percent of the mayors in the state."

For more information about the Mayors' Wellness Campaign, visit www.mayorswellnesscampaign.org.