

HEATED COMPETITION

Eight students tried out April 7 for the prestigious Hot Food Team at Seabreeze High School's Academy of Culinary Design.

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For an hour, there were no smiles.

Under the watchful eyes of two guest judges from Daytona State College, eight intense students in the Academy of Culinary Design at Seabreeze High School were focused on their marinades, garnishes and pots of rice. At the April 7 trial run, in which each student had one hour to prepare a dish of their choice, four spots on the Hot Food Team would be awarded.

For the next 10 months, the winning students will prepare for the ProStart Culinary State Competition, which takes place in February, in Orlando. Last year's Hot Food Team, comprising C.J.

Partington, Hayley Urquhart, Alexis Zemball and Joanna Mazzullo, finished eighth out of 50 culinary teams in Florida.

According to teacher Samantha Couch, who is also an alumna of the program, the 2016 competition team will follow a similar schedule as last year's: They will practice five days per week, even during the summer. Two of the practices each week will be at 5 a.m.

But all that time — even before dawn — was worth it to last year's team.

"It helped us a lot," Partington said. "I felt disciplined. It felt good to be on a schedule and working toward a greater goal."

"The best part was becoming a family," Urquhart added. "We spent —"

"— A lot of time together," said



Samantha Couch is not only the instructor of the Academy of Culinary Design, but also an alumna.

Zemball, finishing her former teammate's thought.

Sophomore Brandon Veleski was one of the eight students who tried out for the 2016 Hot Food Team. He said he has been cooking since sixth grade, and he hoped to make his parents proud. He said the trial was stressful, but, "I just wanted to focus and put all that pressure toward the dish."

At least part of Veleski's pressure is now gone: He was named the head chef of the team. Joining him are Nate Griesdorf, Lea Gray and Alex Burrell. Cammi Vail is the alternate.

After the students completed their trial, they were critiqued in front of their peers by DSC's chef instructor, David Weir, and baking instructor, Kathy Douglas, who pointed out where the aspiring chefs had gone wrong and offered tips for the future.

Couch was not surprised by the intensity in the eyes of her students. They had applied for the program in eighth grade. If they can make it to Orlando at the ProStart event, the students will shine.

"They become very competitive," Couch said. "They've given hundreds of hours, and it all comes down to one."



Alexis Zemball, Hayley Urquhart and C.J. Partington, along with Joanna Mazzullo (not pictured), comprised last year's Hot Food Team.

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