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Food Fight

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Light glints off four stainless steel stoves as the fluorescents are flipped on in 206 MacKay, one of several kitchen labs in the building. The four kitchenettes in this room are currently clean, quiet, and empty—but they won’t be for long. Soon, they will become the Iowa State equivalent of Kitchen Stadium, full of neotenic chefs, frenzied assistants, billows of smoke and steam, exotic ingredients and, ultimately, creations of culinary delight.

Actually, most of that isn’t true. The student chefs in this cookoff won’t use assistants, and none of the ingredients are “exotic.” In fact, most of the ingredients could be found on any typical college student’s cupboard (or dorm-room) shelf. In the presence of six sinks, four stoves and ovens, three student’s cupboards, two full-size refrigerators, yards of Formica counter top and four sets of clear, square canisters containing snow white flour and sugar, it is here that one of the greatest showdowns this campus has ever seen will take place. But before we light the stoves and things get complicated, let’s go over the rules for the competition that will crown, once and for all, the Iowa State Grand Champion of Culinary Prowess:

Rule 1. The student chefs must use at least three ingredients from a list of college staples to produce one dish. On the list: peanut butter, jelly, ketchup, canned tuna, snack-size bags of potato chips, macaroni and cheese, and, of course, ramen noodles.

Rule 2. Each chef is allowed to use $10 to purchase ingredients not on the provided list.

Rule 3. The chefs will have a half-hour to complete their dishes.

Rule 4. A panel of three ethos editors will judge the dishes based on taste and presentation to declare a winner.
Now the chefs are entering the arena. First is Aaron Lenz, dressed in a white chef coat, black-and-white check chef pants, and a tall, white paper hat. He chooses the kitchenette farthest from the door as his battleground and begins unpacking his purchased ingredients from plastic grocery bags. From the bags appear a jar of chocolate syrup, a small bottle of milk, a sack of sugar, some cornstarch, a bottle of vegetable oil, half a dozen eggs, and a few bananas.

Chris Metzger is the next competitor in, and dressed in a gray hoodie and blue jeans, he seems less fiercely competitive about becoming the high ruler of student cuisine today. He also has a tall, white chef hat, so maybe looks are deceiving. His original ingredients that will bring him the sweet taste of victory? Skewer sticks. It’s a bold choice, admirable even... maybe. That probably remains to be seen.

Chris seems slightly intimidated by Aaron’s ingredients.

“You brought eggs?” Chris asks.

They discuss things, undoubtedly, of a highly specific culinary nature that the average student wouldn’t understand, and overheard Lenz mentioning that after he graduates, he’s going to the CIA. Or, in layman’s terms, the Culinary Institute of America. Seems there may be a ringer in the midst.

The next chef, Megan Meyers, enters as she pulls a white coat over her black sweater and jeans. Megan has brought a package of precooked chicken breasts, a box of white rice, a white onion, a golden bell pepper, and a small jar of chopped garlic.

The timer is set, the chefs are ready, and the judges are hungry—it’s time to begin. Go!

Megan rushes to the college ingredients, grabs a jar of jelly and a bottle of ketchup, then rushes back to her station. She dumps the whole jar of jelly and about half the ketchup bottle into a saucepan over medium heat. Conspicuous whispering commences between the judges.

Meanwhile, Chris is spreading peanut butter on one slice of bread and jelly on another, then smushing them together, sandwich-style. A small frying pan heats on his stove. PBJ complete, he opens a can of tuna and drains it over a sink through a sieve. Inevitably, the smell makes its way around the room.

Megan uses this as an opportunity to talk trash. “Chris, yours stinks. Is it going to taste good?” she asks from the adjacent kitchenette.

“No,” Chris laughs while flipping the sandwich in his frying pan. The judges exchange nervous glances.

As the hostility between the competitors builds, Aaron begins his dish with eggs broken into a glass bowl, whisked with milk and sugar. He coats the insides of small, ridged bowls called ramekins with even more sugar. The judges salivate.

Ignoring more banter between Chris and Megan, Aaron adds peanut butter to the mixture in the glass bowl. Chris and Megan chide him, sarcastically referring to him as “Chef.” Undaunted, Aaron whisks with renewed fury.

An announcement that 10 minutes have expired hushes the harassments, and each chef begins to concentrate on the task at hand. Megan slices onion and peppers in small pieces and adds them, as well as some garlic, to her ketchup-and-jelly sauce, and begins to cook rice and a package of crushed ramen noodles in boiling water.

Suddenly, and with so much time still on the clock, Chris raises his arms in triumph and announces that his dish is complete. A gutsy move. The judges gather to inspect the dish: A grilled PBJ sandwich and a grilled tuna sandwich that have been cut into fourths and stacked one on top of the other. The tower of alternating PBJ and tuna sandwiches is held together club-sandwich-style, with a skewer. The sad, stinky creation rests on a white plate. Voila! The judges grumble in obvious disappointment. Chris takes the remaining time to play video poker on his cell phone.

The competition is down to two. The two chefs are now putting their noses to the grindstone, and the halfway mark passes without much talk. Megan
adds chicken to her sauce and sets the burner on high so the food will eat through, then begins decorating an oval-shaped plate with small pieces of onion and pepper. She now just has to wait until her sauce and rice are finished cooking.

Aaron pours the contents of the glass bowl, a soufflé batter, into ramekins cups and places them in his oven. He slices banana to add to chocolate syrup for a complement to the soufflé, mini fried banana sandwiches. Aaron tests the temperature of a saucepan of vegetable oil with a little water, and the oil explodes all over the stove. Too hot. He turns down the heat and waits a few more seconds before adding several of his little choco-banana sandwiches.

With the ten-minute mark slightly passed, Megan begins to plate up her recipe, laying a bed of rice and ramen on her place, then pouring her dark purple sauce over the top. She adds strips of bell pepper as a final touch.

Aaron is now the final cook preparing his dish, and things are getting down to the wire. He puts the choco-banana sandwiches on small, white plates, along with a spoonful of jelly. Aaron takes the final minute to remove his tan-colored, fluffy-risen soufflés from the oven and place them on the plates with the mini-sandwiches and jelly.

Ding! The timer goes off just as Aaron plates the final soufflé. The dishes are complete, the kitchenettes are dirty with soufflé batter, tuna juice, and an odd ketchup-and-jelly concoction, and the chefs are late for class. As the judges begin tasting, the chefs head out, sticking ethos with three kitchens of dirty dishes.
Judges' Comments

Judge 1:

Cyclone Stir-fry: Oddly enough, regarding the ketchup-jelly sauce, this judge was somewhat suspicious of a mixture made of the sidekick of peanut butter and the favorite companion of French Fries. Turns out, there was no need for fear: "Surprisingly, it tastes like real Chinese food," he said. "The flavors work well together with the chicken and rice."

Peanut Butter Soufflé: The textures are what caught the tastebuds here, with the soufflé being slightly dry for this judge. The sweet mini chocolate sandwich was well-received. "The banana was the perfect complement."

PB/Tuna Club: Unconvinced of original efforts here, the only comment was a sarcastic, "Wow, how creative."

Judge 2:

Cyclone Stir-fry: This judge was mainly concerned with his stomach during judging — namely how it would feel after eating some of the strange concoctions. However, upon tasting the dish, he proclaimed it his favorite and said, "It made me feel good about myself."

Peanut Butter Soufflé: Impressive was the adjective the judge came up with for this dish. He also found it somewhat dry, but thought it would be better than the 2-month-old open jar of salsa in his fridge. Extra style points were added for the crimping the edges of the mini-sandwiches.

PB/Tuna Club: "I can't wait to try this," was what he said about this culinary delight. However, one could probably safely assume heavy sarcasm on the part of the judge as well.

Judge 3:

Cyclone Stir-fry: Though the color of the sauce (dark purple, "like cougelaed grape Kool-Aid") on the dish was somewhat off-putting, the taste more than made up for the look. "The yellow pepper and purple actually sort of compliment each other, like on a color wheel," this judge said.

Peanut Butter Soufflé: Immediately under the spell of the chocolate, the small fried sandwiches scored high with this judge. "They melt in the mouth... after the first crunch."

PB/Tuna Club: Despite being impressed with the skewer sticks, she found this dish's mixture of tuna and peanut butter to not be as pleasant as the jelly and ketchup. "Crispy," was all she said.