

[News](#) > [Feature](#) - [Airmen compete in culinary challenge to become top chef](#)

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by Airman 1st Class Joe McFadden
1st Special Operations Wing Public Affairs

12/8/2009 - **HURLBURT FIELD, Fla.** -- As staff members loudly shouted the amount of time remaining, Airman 1st Class Nadia Amaya, a food service specialist with the 1st Special Operations Force Support Squadron, laughed to herself over each announcement of the nearing deadline.

"The time constraints are surprising, since we're used to doing this every day with much more food," she said.

Between reminders from kitchen personnel about time and waiting for her barbecue steak to cook on the grill, she focused most of her attention on the sides including roasted potatoes that were sautéed with butter and drizzled with honey, and fresh asparagus stalks.

Her entrée, called the "American Grand Slam," was prepared only for this one occasion, and it would be sampled by just four people. It was her entry in the Chef of the Quarter competition at the Riptide Dining Facility at Hurlburt Field Dec. 3. She and three fellow Airmen were given full use of the facility's kitchen and just 90 minutes to prepare the same Swiss steak and vegetable dish.

However, this quarter's challenge included a secret ingredient that had to be used: a mango.

"It could have been worse," said Airman 1st Class Jorge Farromeque, 1st SOFSS, as he mashed diced mango bits before placing them into a sauce. "It could have been a spice, which can throw everything off."

His dish was a slice of steak served with sautéed peppers, potatoes and mango sauce known as the "Peruvian Party Platter." Airman Farromeque said he felt confident that his take on a classic staple would please the judges.

Dividing her time between the steamer and the cutting board, Senior Airman Eun Yi, 1st SOFSS, prepared her entry "Teriyaki Steak," a mix of shredded beef, white rice and fresh broccoli.

"This is based on a famous Korean dish called 'bulgogi,'" she said while judiciously adding drops of soy sauce to each portion. "And it's one of my favorites."

Senior Airman Ashley Zamora, 1st SOFSS, used her parents' influence to make a grilled steak and steamed rice plate she lovingly called "Daddy's Favorite," as well as a chocolate-covered cherry dessert her mother made for her as a kid.

"We made the most out of what we had during the holidays," she said. "Although it wasn't much, everybody loved the 'mouse-in-a-house' desert."

As time ran out, the Airmen had to place their finished products on a meal cart that was unveiled before the guest judges in the dining room. The four-member panel deliberated on the merits of each of the dishes between palate-cleansing sips of water.

"This is going to be close," said Col. Mark Johnson, 1st Special Operations Mission Support Group commander and competition judge.

When the judges were ready with their verdict, the four Airmen came back from the kitchen to complete the first cooking competition of their careers. Based on the overall scores of taste, presentation, creativity and originality, Airman Amaya's dish earned her the judge's pick for chef of the quarter. She also received a one-day pass and will have her picture posted on a plaque in the dining facility.

"All I want to say is that Farromeque can take back that comment he made that guys can cook better than girls," Airman Amaya said as she accepted the winning certificate.

Dominic Damiano, a local restaurant owner, chef and competition judge later offered advice to each of the Airmen about the presentation and quality of their submitted meals.

"All of you should continue to keep challenging yourself," he said. "We may even try a couple of things done here at my place."

Photos

1 of 7



Airman 1st Class Nadia Amaya, 1st Special Operations Force Support Squadron food service specialist, checks the clock during the quarterly Top Chef competition Dec. 3 at Hurlburt Field. The cooks were allotted 90 minutes to prepare an entrée. (Air Force photo by Senior Airman Julianne Showalter)

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12/30/2009 9:39:14 AM ET

Thank you for recognizing our hard working food service personnel. Your base has also been selected as a finalist for the Hennessy contest. Good luck. Stan Gibson CFEIFSEA representative for the multiple category

Stan Gibson CFE, North Palm Beach FL

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