On Campus

Food Fight

Tableside at the Battle of the Dining Halls

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The lights are dimmed, and the crowd sits in hushed anticipation. On a large stage, a dozen chefs dressed in paper toques stand grouped according to their red, baby blue, and navy T-shirts. One member of each group holds a tray covered by a shiny silver dome. All eyes are focused on the table in front of them, where Marcus Samuelsson, an Ethiopian-born, Swedish-raised celebrity chef, waits to judge their interpretations of global street food.

One of the chefs steps forward and presents her dish: a Dominican-inspired brisket slider with pickled red onions, arugula, and cilantro-jalapeño *crema*. Instead of bread, the beef is sandwiched between two *tostones*, or bright-yellow fried plantains. She steps back, and Samuelsson takes a bite.

If you've ever watched a cooking contest on reality TV, you know this moment. The judge chews thoughtfully and makes notes on a scorecard. He might take another bite; he might whisper to another judge. The tension builds. And finally he speaks.

"This dish is clearly all about texture, with the crispy tostones complementing the slow-braised meat," says Samuelsson. "Tostones can be difficult to do well, but these are executed perfectly. The dish is well-balanced and flavorful. Well done, chef."

The chef exhales, and the crowd erupts in applause.

It's a routine that Samuelsson knows well. In addition to working as a chef and restaurateur — he is the owner of Harlem's Red Rooster and Streetbird, as well as nine other restaurants worldwide — Samuelsson is a regular judge on the Food

Network’s *Chopped* and *Iron Chef America*. But today at Columbia he is evaluating an unusual group of contestants: the chefs at the University’s three residential dining halls.

This is the inaugural Battle of the Dining Halls — a Food Network–style competition held earlier this academic year in the auditorium at Lerner Hall. Vicki Dunn, the executive director of Columbia Dining, says that the rivalry between Ferris Booth Commons, John Jay, and JJ’s Place is not new.

“It started three or four years ago at a meeting with our student advisory committee,” Dunn says. “The kids were getting fired up about their favorite dining halls. So we thought, let’s try to encourage that friendly competition.”

Illustration by Brian Rea

Their first idea was to give away T-shirts advertising hashtags that students could use to promote #TeamJohnJay, #FerrisForever, and #JJsFam on social media. At the same time, Columbia was also bringing in celebrity chefs for “meet and eat” events with students. Using cookbooks written by the guest chef, Columbia Dining would recreate some of the chef’s famous dishes to serve to students.

Dunn was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiastic feedback from the guest chefs — Robert Irvine, the notoriously cranky host of several Food Network shows, lavishly praised the dining staff’s rendition of one of his dishes — but when it came time to pick a judge for the Battle of the Dining Halls, they knew it had to be Samuelsson.

“We’ve had a relationship with Marcus Samuelsson for several years. He’s a fixture in the neighborhood. We actually share vendors with him and sometimes even buy cornbread from his restaurant,” Dunn says. “Plus, the students love him.”

That much is clear as the competition reaches its climax. Samuelsson works the audience, slinging Red Rooster hats and jumping off the stage to pose for selfies with students. But he also takes his job seriously, carefully tasting each entry — the brisket slider from JJ’s Place, a Caribbean jerk-chicken pita sandwich from John Jay, and a pork-belly pho gyro from Ferris.

“I’m always happy to do events in the community,” Samuelsson says between bites of gyro. “Also — no lie — this is good food. Columbia should be proud of what they’re doing here.”

When it comes time for the formal evaluations, Samuelsson is joined onstage by a panel of five students, who were selected by video application to serve as his co-judges. Together, they’ll each take another taste of the entrées, confer, and agree on a winner.

Before the grand prize, Samuelsson announces the audience-choice award (everyone at the event has had the opportunity to vote for this honor via text message). It’s JJ’s Place, by a landslide. The crowd in front of the JJ’s booth cheers, hoping that it’s a harbinger of the grand prize, and the other teams fidget nervously.

Everyone looks to Samuelsson. He consults with one of the student judges one last time, and she confirms it: the winner is JJ’s Place.

On stage, the spotlight narrows on the crew from JJ’s, who whoop and holler and pat each other on the back. Christina Appollonio, the chef and general manager, steps forward and accepts the sort of ornate championship belt more associated with boxing gloves than oven mitts.

“Respect!” yells someone from John Jay, as their team shuffles off the stage and starts packing up. “But don’t worry. We’ll get you next year.”

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