

An Unexpected Journey to the Culinary Olympics

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Tuesday, October 25, 2016. It is 6:00 a.m. in Erfurt Germany. The sky is cloudy with a damp chill as we carry in the multiple boxes to the table. As I gaze everywhere, there is a sea of chefs hard at work on their culinary displays. On their white jackets are flags from around the world. I'm working with my professor to finish setting up the table and those last minute touches. The spotlights are casting a beautiful color on the ten plates. The menu card is up front, and I check for smudges or fingerprints. A quick wipe and all is set! Across the table are several Japanese chefs working at a feverish pace. At 6:20 a.m., a woman in a long, white coat with clipboard stops by the area. She checks the entry form to ensure we're in the right area and asks if there is anything we need. At 6:40 a.m., with so little time left, a man in a lab coat stops by to remind us we have to leave at 7:00 a.m. We continue to arrange the plates and make final adjustments. The clock doesn't seem to stop until 6:55 a.m. Suddenly time seems to stop as my professor says we are done. "Let's quickly get the final pictures and head out," he says. A couple of pictures are taken and then I turn around again. This is what passion and dedication look like. You could feel and see it in all the tired eyes just below the toques. "It's 7:00 a.m., you have to leave now," says another judge as he motions us towards the exit. We head towards the exit, and I continue to observe all the creative works. This is the second entry that I have assisted with. This one is even better than the first—I am sure we have done something great!

You might be wondering, how did I get to the Culinary Olympics? A year in the making, the seeds for this study abroad experience began in Fall 2015. I volunteered to assist with the City Tech Garde Manger Team as they presented at the 147th Annual Salon of Culinary Arts. There was a lot of intense work that went into their beautiful culinary exhibition. Much of this appeared as a continuation of what I was learning in my culinary and pastry classes. When Fall 2016 registration opened in April, I signed up for Garde Manger, an advanced culinary class. A little later in the spring semester of 2016, I learned about this unique opportunity to participate in the Culinary Olympics with Professor Walljasper. Filled with curiosity, I asked for more information. I learned the competition is endorsed by the World Association of Chefs Societies (WACS), and occurs every four years. There would be regular practices, and it was hosted in Erfurt, Germany. I knew being an assistant would require dedication, hard work and that I expand my horizons. With excitement and hesitancy, I completed and submitted my

application. “Approved”! I was so excited to hear that I was approved and could start the next part of this journey.

As part of the program, I began building a foundation for the trip with guided research. This would be my first excursion to Germany, Europe and an international culinary competition. I wanted to learn about who hosted this event, why it was significant and what it might be like to visit and work there. One of my first resources was *Kochkunst in Bildern: Illustrated Culinary Art 5*, a book that presents the entries from the 2004 Culinary Olympics. The Verband der Koche Deutschlands (German Chef Association) have held this event since 1900. The Culinary Olympics is considered the highest competition in the world. WACS is a global chef association with 100 member countries representing 10 million professional chefs worldwide. Additionally, I utilized library and online sources to understand more about German culture and the host city, Erfurt. When I saw the pictures of the national teams’ cuisine in a book, it was hard to imagine how the chefs made these beautiful plates.

Preparation and practice are fundamental to success. In August, I began weekly eight-hour practices with Professor Walljasper. I knew how important the project was for the professor and I was nervous and uncertain about my culinary strengths. These regular sessions helped me to connect past class experiences and the current Garde Manger class to our preparations. Each session was building on what we prepared in the previous lab. There were so many advanced techniques we practiced: dehydrating vegetables, sous vide, curing, plating and glazing with aspic, which is a liquid made with gelatin. For example, I made savory tuiles multiple times to create the spoon shape. I tested all-purpose flour with granulated sugar, cake flour with granulated sugar, all-purpose flour with powdered sugar and more. Each batter’s texture was different. These processes reminded me of chemistry: repetition of testing, observing, thinking, creating a hypothesis and improving. It was similar to what I had done in my life already. This was a great boost for my confidence, which was further enhanced as I worked with my professor on numerous components for the twenty different plates.

Traveling to Germany for a culinary competition is a unique experience and requires adaptability. The procedure for traveling as part of a school trip is different from a personal one. This was the first time I registered with a government agency as a traveler, and it was great to receive alerts or updates about local occurrences. My suitcase had my knife set and additional kitchen utensils. The organization was crucial and I helped with the final packing of perishable and fragile items. In my research, it appeared like English would be commonly spoken in Erfurt. I worked on learning basic German phrases, such as *guten morgen*, *wo ist*, and *dankeschön*. Participating in the culinary competition meant we needed to shop and purchase a variety of items. I was able to utilize technology and ingenuity to help find needed groceries and kitchen equipment. The Germans were so helpful and hospitable; I think this was partly due to my chef jacket and IKA pins. They recognized I was part of the Culinary Olympics.

The culinary competition requires a very high level of dedication and deep commitment. From the practices, I knew there would be a substantial amount of

items to complete. All of the effort prior to my arrival in Germany had prepared me for the intense week. I was ready to step into the unknown with a strong sense of self-confidence. We prepared based on the practices and the plan. We competed twice in the Individual Culinary Arts category, and each entry was ten different plates. On the first day at 7:00 a.m., the judges said it was time to leave the competition floor. I took one last look at the table that I helped to create and finish. Now, it was time for the international jury of judges to score the entries. The first entry earned a diploma and after that day we understood better the high level displayed.

We repeated the process again two days later, adapting based on feedback we received for the first entry. The second entry was improved over the initial one; you could tell it was a higher level. Wow, so much effort went into this presentation and can you imagine the plates looked like ones in *Kochkunst in Bildern: Illustrated Culinary Art 5*? It is hard to put into words the feeling of assisting in this final preparation and exhibiting in the Culinary Olympics. That evening, we were at the award ceremony and they announced Professor Walljasper was awarded a bronze medal. I am so proud to be his assistant.

A trip of a lifetime creates a bigger world. On the second night, I met the President of the Japan Chef Association and officers. As they asked me about how I came to be here, they were truly amazed to learn I traveled from New York to help my professor compete. Among the group was a journalist who edits a Japanese magazine, *Weekly HotelRes*. He was so impressed that I was asked to be an interviewee for his article the next time I visit Japan. I couldn't believe this opportunity. Even though I am a student, it amazed me that a journalist was interested in my career. The return to regular routine in New York and classes was great, but something was different. Moreover, I could see the changed atmosphere and attitude of my friends, fellow students and faculty after I came back. They congratulated us on the bronze medal and told me that they were proud of us. When I saw their smiles and the sparkle in their eyes, I felt like, "Yes, I made it!!!"

After I came back, I applied what I learned in the Olympics at the first edible buffet competition held here at City Tech. I checked many pictures which I took at the Olympics to create my team plate. I tested most of the menu at least once in my house by myself to see how they looked and the overall taste balance. The size of each menu is smaller than other teams because the smaller size was a trend in the Olympics. Furthermore, I checked the timeline very carefully because finishing on time is extremely important for a public competition. As a result of my journey, you could see the global influence on my team's work. The judges reviewed the four entries and gave valuable feedback. When the scores were tallied, my team won a gold medal and the best of the show as determined by the five professional chefs who came as guest judges.

As you have read and learned about my journey, I hope you now understand what an unbelievable experience this was for me. There were moments of doubt during the process. One step at a time, I found my answers and so much more. My initial research helped to me to appreciate culinary arts on a global level. Uncertainty faded with the extensive practice, personal growth and mentorship

from this experience. This was a unique opportunity to witness first-hand the professional creativity, organization, and commitment of passionate culinarians. In the future, I hope that more students will pursue opportunities to participate in such an unforgettable event. My world is so much richer for having participated in this chance of a lifetime.

Nominating Faculty: Professor Robert Walljasper, Hospitality Management 4963, Department of Hospitality Management, School of Professional Studies, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

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