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Competition can breathe my fumes



By **FRANK MICKADEIT** | Orange County Register

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My goal at Saturday night's Celebrity Chef OC was merely to create something that 1) I could give a fancy name, and, 2) was reasonably unlikely to give the judges ptomaine poisoning.

The organizers of the fundraising competition, Community SeniorServ – the Meals on Wheels folks – had given the eight teams a list of ingredients and equipment we'd find at our cooking stations on the patio of the Westin South Coast Plaza. Minutes before we began, we got the "secret ingredient," which we had to incorporate into an appetizer and entree. The ingredient: star fruit.

"What is star fruit?" my partner, **Brett Ackerman**, asked one of our competitors, Chef **Bruno Serato** of the White House in Anaheim.

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"All I know is I've got bacon and peanut butter," I said, reciting the two items that jumped out at me from the food list.

"I had a really good hors d'oeuvre with bacon, peanut butter and banana at the Pacific Club once," she said.

My muse! Forty minutes later I had created Cigar-Smoke-Infused Banana-Bacon Canapé with Quenelle of Skippy's on Spinach Leaf and Star-Fruit Garnish." Probably *not* coming soon to the White House.

That's because Serato got this look of revulsion on his face when he saw me smoking a Trinidad while cooking – as if I'd donned my apron fresh from snaking a toilet. Imagine had he seen me add *my* secret ingredient: I held up the strainer containing the bacon and let my cigar smoke curl into the meat.

I tried to hide my secret from other competitors, chiefly the team of **Barbara Venezia** and **Patti Gordon**, who actually know how to cook but caused a greater stir with their black, body-hugging latex outfits from The Slutty Chef or somewhere. They were clearly spying.

Appetizer done, it was time to assist Brett in the main course. Brett, son of **Dick** and **Linda Ackerman**, is an inspired amateur chef, which is why I asked him to join me.

Brett had quickly realized why nobody had heard of star fruit. Presentation-wise, it creates nice star-shaped medallions when sliced width-wide, but it is about as tasty as a cucumber. Cross this with a kiwi, and you'd have a helluva fruit. So as soon as they told us to start, Brett had diced some of the single, precious star fruit they gave us and started pickling it in red wine vinegar, honey and shallots.

But now we had about 15 minutes to go and hadn't even started cooking the whitefish. We had no idea what it was – sea bass, halibut? I'd come up with something later. Brett just had to start frying it *now*. It was about this time I almost set the hotel on fire.

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With maybe two minutes to spare, Brett pulled the two filets off the flame and nestled them in diced and pickled star fruit and bell peppers. I blew some cigar smoke it their direction, and we submitted Endangered Malaysian Piranha on Bed of Tropical Salsa with Pickled Star Fruit.

I had no expectations . So an hour later, when emcee **Samantha McDermott** announced that the winner of Best Entrée was ... *us* ... well, my jaw literally fell.

Of course, it was Brett and his decision to let the star fruit pickle until the last possible moment. We hooted, hugged, and Bruno offered Brett a job. And in the Dumpster, vermin were having a party with bacon-banana canapés.

Photos of the competition: ocregister.com/columns/frank/ .

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