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All the right ingredients

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Glenview's Jake Dizon competes in an episode of Food Network's "Chopped Junior," which aired April 18. IMAGE COURTESY OF FOOD NETWORK



COVER STORY

Dizon stars on Food Network's 'Chopped Junior'

DANIEL I. DORFMAN
Freelance Reporter

Like almost any child, Jake Dizon loves to cruise through television channels. In his case, cooking shows were a constant destination as the Glenview native became mesmerized by the abilities of the top chefs.

"I was watching the professional cooks and I was thinking that would be super cool," he said.

For Dizon, his admiration of culinary artists transformed into an imitation that is now available for a national television audience, as the 13-year-old appeared on Food Network's "Chopped Junior" program on April 18.

Dizon, a seventh-grader at Wilmette's Marie Murphy School, traced his interest in cooking to not only what he saw on TV, but also watching his parents prepare meals.

Soon, Dizon developed specialties, including a seared sirloin steak that he likes to combine with a rice pilaf or roast carrots topped with a shiitake mushroom cream sauce. Then there are his adobo chicken wings, with a personalized touch of soy sauce, vinegar and brown sugar, plus other secret ingredients.

As he became more comfortable in the kitchen, "Chopped Junior" became a steady television appointment. Approximately a year ago, Dizon thought he had the skills for the show and applied online to be a contestant. Several months later, someone associated with the show responded and, after a series of telephone and Skype interviews, Dizon got word in a September email that he was selected.

He traveled to New York City last October for four days to tape the program, contending against other students with celebrity chefs serving as judges.

"It was one of the best days of my life," he said. "I was super excited."

During the first round, Jake Dizon was tasked with using pork fried rice, leftover frozen herbs, cheese rinds and ugly salad greens. With only four minutes to plan his dishes, he stuck with what he knew.

"I went with an ugly salad greens salad and pork and cheese rind crostini," he said. "I've been working with crostini a lot and I knew that I had it down, so I was thinking about whether or not I could incorporate those ingredients, and I could. I knew

the pork would complement the cheese."

Apparently, the judges agreed, and Jake Dizon advanced from the first round. Although eliminated in the second round, he doesn't have any regrets.

"When I look back many years later, this will be a big staple in my life," he said. "It's one of the most important moments of my life so far, and it's very meaningful to me."

Jen Karakosta, a teacher at New Trier, tutored him for the "Chopped Junior" appearance.

"If it weren't for her, I wouldn't have done nearly as well because she taught me the system and the basic, staple recipes I needed to know that helped me on the show, including the crostini," Jake Dizon said.

In preparation for the show, Karakosta would provide "mystery" ingredients — like leftover lasagna and broken taco shells — and task him with creating an edible dish. She would then give him advice

based on what he created.

"I was so proud of him," she said. "We started with basic knife skills so he could learn to cut accurately and quickly, and because the judges would look at it. We also talked a lot about

flavor profiling and how things go together, even if they don't seem like they would go well together."

Additional reporting by Editor Chris Pullam





Glenview's Jake Dizon cooks pork during an episode of Food Network's "Chopped Junior," which aired April 18. IMAGE COURTESY OF FOOD NETWORK

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