

Marie Murphy student competes on Food Network's 'Chopped Junior'

New Trier teacher trains seventh-grader for show

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Like almost any child, Jake Dizon loves to cruise through television channels. In his case, cooking shows were a constant destination as the Marie Murphy student 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 the Wilmette school, traced his interest in cooking to not only what he saw on TV, but also watching his parents prepare meals. "It looked pretty cool," he said. "Once I got a bit older and I understood what cooking was, I thought 'hey, I think this is pretty interesting and I might get into this.'"

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 ap-



Dizon and New Trier teacher Jen Karakosta train for the competition. PHOTO SUBMITTED

pointment. 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 last October for four days to tape the program, contending against three other students with celebrity chefs Amanda Freitag, Sam Kass and Marc Murphy serving as judges.

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

The exhilaration was there for the chef, while another emotion was present for his mom.

"I felt like I was more nervous than he was," Nicole Dizon said. "He was confident and calm going in. I was more of a wreck."

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 he was 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."

"I can't believe what he and the other kids were able to do in 30 minutes with all those very strange ingredients," Nicole Dizon said.

Jake Dizon is now looking to build off the appearance, likely taking cooking classes this summer. With

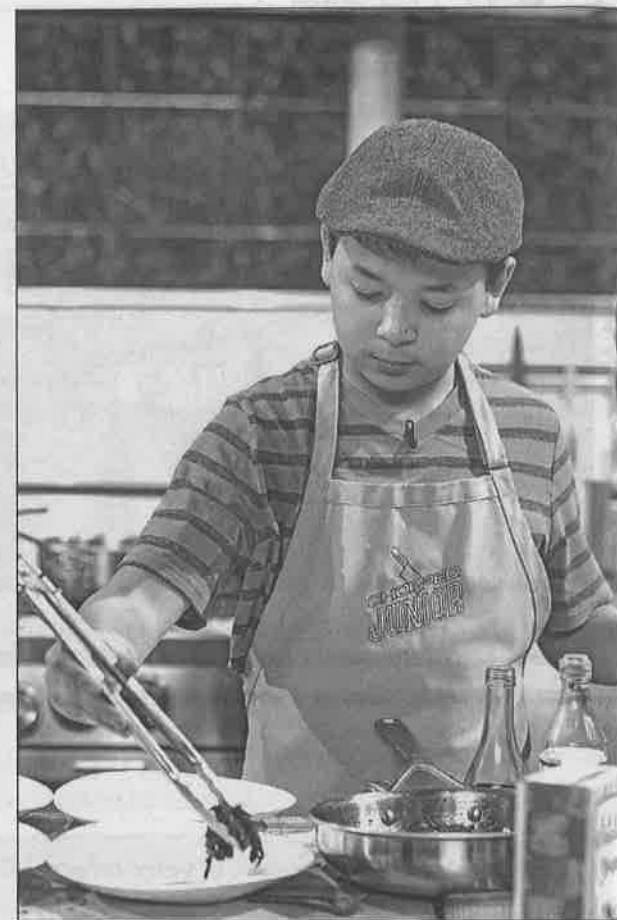
the family taste buds hanging in anticipation, Jake has set his sights on learning how to prepare crab, lobster and shellfish.

Scheduled to enroll at New Trier in 2018, he could very well have a familiar teacher in the high school's culinary classes. Jen Karakosta, a Glenview resident who tutored him for the "Chopped Junior" appearance, teaches at the high school.

"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 and Nicole Dizon would provide "mystery" ingredients — like leftover lasagna and broken taco shells — and task him with creating an edible dish. Karakosta would then give him advice based on what he chose to cook.

"I was so proud of him," she said. "We started with basic knife skills so he could learn to cut accu-



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



Dizon traveled to New York last October. IMAGE COURTESY OF FOOD NETWORK

ately 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 actually go well together."

Away from the kitchen, Dizon has interests

in chess, swimming and learning about the specifics of science.

"I like problem-solving and creating stuff," he said. "Sort of like cooking."

Additional reporting by Contributing Editor Chris Pullam