

South Dakota's Culinary Talents Shine: High School Champions Crowned at 2024 ProStart Invitational

PIERRE, SD – Teams of South Dakota high school students put their culinary and hospitality management skills to the test at the 2024 South Dakota ProStart Invitational, held March 12 in Pierre. Champion high schools include Northeast Technical High School (Watertown), T.F. Riggs High School (Pierre), and Sioux Falls CTE Academy.

The ProStart Invitational is a fast-paced event where students demonstrate work-ready skills in culinary arts, hospitality management, public speaking, and more. This year, ten teams competed in culinary, management, and cake decorating competitions.

In the culinary portion, teams have just sixty minutes to prepare a three-course gourmet meal without using electricity. Many of the state's premier chefs serve as judges, scoring teams on presentation, taste, sanitation, and teamwork.

Sioux Falls CTE Academy took the top prize in the culinary division, earning them a place in the national ProStart competition in Baltimore, MD, on April 26-28. Connor Ibis, Jacob Newell, Alex Brenner, Misty Vonderleith, and Davian Gunderson were the winning culinary team members, instructed by Janelle Whempner.

Teams also compete in a management competition, where they present concepts for a restaurant, its operations, marketing, critical thinking, and menu. Foodservice and industry professionals evaluate their business plans and presentation skills.

Northeast Technical High School won first place and will advance to the national competition. Competitors included Alex Lam and Alisa DeMoss. They are instructed by Kathleen McCann.

Finally, T.F. Riggs students MacKenize Magee and Kierstan Miller's Saint Patrick's Day-themed dessert took home first-place in cake decorating, a competition unique to South Dakota. The team was instructed by LaKisha Jordan.

"Through ProStart, high school students develop culinary and hospitality management skills applicable in a variety of businesses," said South Dakota Retailers Association Exec. Dir. Nathan Sanderson. "This is real-world career preparation at its finest."

ProStart is a joint effort of the South Dakota Department of Education, the South Dakota Retailers Association, and the South Dakota ProStart Advisory Committee.

At the end of the competition, two students were presented with culinary achievement awards for their exceptional skills.

Alex Spell of Mitchell CTE Academy was awarded the President's Award, given to an individual who exhibits leadership throughout the day's tough competition. The Black Hills Chapter of the American Culinary Federation sponsors and selects that award.

The South Dakota Retailers Association, along with guest judges, honored Alex Brenner of Sioux Falls CTE Academy. Brenner received the Knife Skills Award due to her overall technique and talent in the kitchen.

Participating schools in the 2024 South Dakota ProStart Invitational included: Florence High School, Harrisburg High School, Huron High School, Madison Central High School, Mithcell Career and Technical Academy, Mobridge-Pollock High School, Northeast Technical High School (Watertown), Sioux Falls Career and Technical Academy, Sturgis Brown High School, and T.F. Riggs High School (Pierre).

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ProStart® is a nationwide, two-year high school culinary and restaurant management program. Administered by the Retailers Association in South Dakota, curriculum and real-world experience converge at the state ProStart® Invitational, where the brightest talents demonstrate work-ready culinary skills in a fast-paced competition.

The South Dakota Retailers Association is one of the nation's oldest and largest state retail organizations, operating as the South Dakota Restaurant, Grocers, and Hospitality associations. We believe in South Dakota businesses, offering information, advocacy, and money-saving services to over 4,000 members. Learn more online at sdra.org.

Photos of all of competition winners and their creations can be found online at: sdra.org/mediaresources