



Enterprise man in bike film fest/3C



Llama drama in Colorado/9C



Camping in retro style/10C



# TAUGHT FROM SCRATCH

Staff photo by Kathy Aney

A student in Kristin Swaggart's advanced foods class at Pendleton High School puts chocolate chip cookie dough on a baking sheet.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Pendleton High School culinary arts teacher Kristin Swaggart instructs her class on the day's assignment — making chocolate mousse.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Culinary arts student Kendall Walker works on chocolate mousse Wednesday in Kristin Swaggart's class at Pendleton High School.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Culinary students Maverick Beach, Kyle Curtis and Caleb Schmit work together to make a chocolate mousse.

## Pendleton's culinary arts program turns classroom into kitchen under 'Chef K'

By ANTONIO SIERRA  
East Oregonian

In Pendleton High School's Room 207, there is little doubt who the head chef is.

Clad in a bright green chef's coat, culinary arts teacher Kristin Swaggart navigated the controlled chaos of her advanced foods class while students attempted to whip up chocolate mousse in the high school's kitchen Wednesday afternoon.

"Chef K," a student nickname that's a carryover from Swaggart's days as a professional chef, was a master of the environment, giving instructions about how to best sweeten mousse while advising a student to put his cellphone away.

The results back up that perception. Students rave about how Swaggart elevated the program since taking over in 2014 and the culinary team is now a nationally competitive group.

Her ease in the kitchen and the classroom belies the fact that as recently as 15 years ago, Swaggart had no intention of becoming a chef, much less a teacher.

After her students begin to settle into their groups, Swaggart takes out a large scrapbook.

Between photos of her family and students is a clipping from a 2003 *East Oregonian* with the heading "Medical Mystery."

The story describes how Swaggart's son, John, suffered from eczema and anaphylactic shock throughout his infancy.

Doctors prescribed medications and topical creams to no avail, and it wasn't until Swaggart and John visited a naturopath that they learned the symptoms were being caused by allergic reactions to peanuts, dairy, soy, eggs and fruit-sugar combinations.

Swaggart took it upon herself to cook everything her family ate from scratch to avoid her son's allergies, and his conditions improved. That story ends there, but the epilogue forms the foundation of Swaggart's current career.

While John would grow out of many of his allergies, Swaggart's passion for cooking remained. A stay-at-home mom at the time, Swaggart's husband began to encourage her to take up cooking as a career.

After her family moved from Pendleton to Kennewick, Swaggart took the plunge and enrolled in Walla Walla Community College's Wine Country Culinary Institute in 2008. Taking classes confirmed her love for the culinary arts.

"I found my bliss," she said.

Upon graduating, Swaggart was hired as the head chef at the John Bookwalter Winery in Richland in 2011.

Despite doing what she loved, the 15-hour days at the bistro began to take a toll on her family.

After a stint managing nutritional services for the Kennewick School District, Swaggart and her family eventually moved back to Pendleton. When they built their new house, they included a commercial kitchen.

While Swaggart thought about being a personal

chef or opening a food truck, she didn't account for Pendleton High School Assistant Principal Troy Jerome.

Jerome urged her to apply for the open culinary arts position, and after some initial hesitation, she agreed to sit in on a culinary class to see if she could work there.

She found herself instantly drawn to helping students learn to cook, and through a special career technical education teaching license, was hired for the job.

Swaggart said she's focused her class on classical cooking skills like knife work, flavoring and weighing ingredients.

Although she's happy to foster interest in culinary

careers, Swaggart said her main goal in these classes is to give her students the cooking skills she learned in her first year of culinary school so they can cook for themselves and eat right.

Students have noticed an improvement in the culinary program since Swaggart took over.

Hunter Brewer said he'd always dabbled in cooking through online videos, but he didn't get serious until he started taking classes and joined the culinary team.

He plans to follow in Swaggart's footsteps and attend Walla Walla Community College's culinary program using a Wildhorse Resort & Casino program to pay for admission.

Emily Hearn grew up cooking with her mother but she hadn't been able to work in a formal culinary program until last year when she moved to Pendleton.

Hearn said the program has allowed her to advance her skills, and will enroll at the Oregon Coast Culinary Institute at Southwest Oregon Community College in Coos Bay. After college, she plans to return to Pendleton and open a bakery.

Brewer and Hearn are both members of the high school's competitive culinary team, which requires tryouts to join.

The team placed well last year at the Family, Career and Community Leaders of America competition and did even better this year.

The girls team took first place in the state competition, meaning they'll represent Oregon in the national competition in San Diego in July. The boys finished fourth.

Swaggart said her students' competitive edge was from their attention to detail.

"It's all in the finishing touches, the perfect knife cuts, the consistency of the sauce," she said.

The culinary program's prospects look even brighter next year, when they'll move to a full-service commercial kitchen at the Pendleton Trade & Tech Center.

Swaggart said she's thrilled to be the first instructor to use the new facilities, where she can teach students the fine art of service in addition to cooking.

Contact Antonio Sierra at [asierra@eastoregonian.com](mailto:asierra@eastoregonian.com) or 541-966-0836.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney



EO file photo

Pendleton High School culinary arts teacher Kristin Swaggart first developed a love of cooking when her son Jonathan developed food allergies and she started making meals from scratch. Jonathan, now 15, also likes to cook. The top photo was taken in the culinary arts classroom this week, the bottom photo was taken in 2003 when Jonathan was 2.