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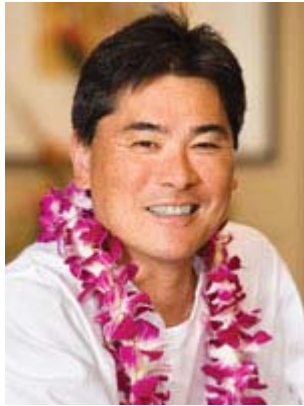
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Roy's founder fosters culinary mentor program

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By DINA BERTA



Roy Yamaguchi

(Aug. 10, 2009) Six years ago award-winning chef Roy Yamaguchi started a scholarship fund in his home state of Hawaii to commemorate the 15th anniversary of his namesake, **Roy's Restaurants**, now a 37-unit chain co-owned by **OSI Restaurant Partners LLC**. Students at the Culinary Institute of the Pacific at Leewood Community College, who ranked first, second and third in a competition each won a one-year scholarship. Today, the program has evolved to include students from culinary schools in the 48 mainland states. In the Aloha Kitchen Challenge, students are paired with a chef-mentor and compete to win a two-month internship at a Roy's. So far this year, challenges have been held in Scottsdale, Ariz.; Summerlin, Nev.; La Jolla, Calif.; and Atlanta. Another competition will be held in Pasadena, Calif., Aug. 12. Yamaguchi, a graduate and board trustee of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., says the scholarships and competitions are a way to give back.

The competitions have no surprises. Students work with a chef to create a dish and then make it for judges. Why isn't it more like the shows you've been on, like "Iron Chef America" and "Top Chef Masters"?

It's all about building a culinary friendship with a mentor chef. The students...get an education in the process on how to develop a dish and tweak it and learn more about ingredients and the styles of the chefs. We're looking at it as a learning process.

So it's a more "real world" experience?

Reality TV has done a lot to promote the culinary world, and hopefully it's for the good. When students, young kids, see these reality-TV shows, they get excited. The problem is they may start thinking stardom is the answer. It's not. They have to realize that their first passion has to be to become a great chef, not a high-profile celebrity chef.

Is it difficult to get chefs to participate with the students?

It all depends on their time. The most important thing is to get chefs or instructors who really care about teaching and being a real mentor, rather than come out to spend a day or two. The bottom line is we have to set up these kids for success. The only way to do that is to talk about your past experiences and help them to be creative and a better student. Hopefully, it won't end after the event, but the relationship will continue to blossom.



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