Culinary Team USA trains for '96

By Judy Stanford

Staff Writer

W""hile the world focuses its attention on the Olympic games at Lillehammer, a team of competitors is in training to take part in a different kind of Olympics. The Culinary Olympics, which will be held in Frankfurt, Germany in 1996, dates back to 1950, the same year as the first Olympic Games. The chefs work for five weeks at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York and have the guidance of James Griffin, chef instructor at Johnson and Wales University in Providence, R.I.


Team USA is still perfecting its entries for the 96 Culinary Olympics. Team members have won awards in past competitions with such dishes as Southwest Catfish Platter, Split Pea Soup and Gold Pheasant Platter.

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Their itinerary included visiting local manufacturers and restaurants to sample Cajun cuisine. "They did this to get oriented to what the foods were," said Joe Broussard of Broussard's Catering, "so they could understand what the foods were that they were learning to make."

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Team USA's mission is the research and development of American cuisine, and we've learned over the last four years that we don't want to get interpretations of cuisines," Keogh said. "We come to the actual places and learn the true cuisines of the area, and we do our own interpretation rather than interpret someone else's interpretation."

The team will be doing culinary research in Brazil, Peru and Colombia, but the only stop in the United States is the one in Acadiana. "If you ask anybody overseas what America's contribution to cuisine has been, outside of McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken," Keogh said. "I think they will say Cajun cooking. It has caught on so well worldwide."

Keogh said he thinks incorporating some of the flavors of the area into their dishes may give the team a boost. "Because it is identifiable to the international audience and we do have an international jury of judges, we need to come down and see if there is something we can put into our presentations, he said.

On Friday, accompanied by chefs Paul Prudhomme and John Folse, the team visited Chicot State Park.

"We want to see indigenous plant life and edible plants beyond what can be obtained in a store," Keogh said. "We want to learn what the native population actually used for cooking and what the methods were."

From there, they went on to Comeaux's to watch the preparation of fried turkey and to Poche's to learn about boudin. Then, they visited several local restaurants, including Prudhomme's Cajun Cafe and Prejean's to try out the foods they want to learn about.

Saturday, the chefs demonstrated their own expertise, preparing some of the dishes they plan to use in competitions. "They practice, just the way an athlete would do, getting ready for it," Broussard explained.

"These practice sessions here are also geared to two world competitions this year," Keogh said. "The first will be in October in Prague, Czechoslovakia. It's the first time the U.S. has been invited to the Eastern Bloc championships. And we'll be in Luxembourg, defending the Culinary World cup, which we captured in 1990."

On Sunday, the team spent the day at USL's Hamilton Hall, attending a seminar presented by some of the area's best chefs. "We're looking for that one technique, that one flavor we can incorporate into our presentations," Keogh said.

Keogh said he and the other Olympic chefs were looking for more than culinary methods. "Of all the places we could go, there's no where we could go to find people with the same amount of passion for cooking," Keogh said.

Keogh said he hopes this area's enthusiasm for food will help to inspire the team and add to their own spirit. "This is no different from the Super Bowl or anything else," Keogh said. "It's not just technical knowledge, it's how much heart you put into it."