

John Beatty, Brady Hogan and Jonathon Jennings had an inauspicious beginning as Year 1 Culinary Arts students at the Career Technology Center.

In one of their first assignments, Jennings and Beatty took turns burning toast in a salamander, a kitchen appliance that is like a broiler and is typically used in a restaurant kitchen to provide high, intense heat for cooking, browning, or caramelizing food.

Beatty earned special recognition because his toast produced plumes of smoke that escaped from the top of the salamander and forced Chef Victoria Richardson to run over from the other side of the kitchen to see what was wrong. Beatty's charred bread was captured for posterity in a picture, even though it is difficult to see it against Beatty's black apron.

Beatty, Hogan and Jennings certainly have come a long way from those awkward first steps.

On Thursday, Jan. 25, Beatty, Hogan and Jennings took another step in their maturation as cooks when they finished first at the Junior Chef State Finals Competition in Jackson. The team, whose nickname is "Burnt Toast", scored 653 points out of a possible 660 to advance to Nationals, which will feature teams from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee, on May 8-11, in Nashville, Tennessee.

The team won the event with a recipe for a frittata that includes eggs, spinach, red bell pepper, sweet potatoes, a little bit of low Sodium Swiss cheese, some creole seasoning and a

little bit of salt and pepper. Jennings said their goal was to make “breakfast for lunch”, or to produce a “brunch option”. The dish also had to adhere to the National School Lunch Program regulations, so it could be served in cafeterias across the nation if chosen by the USDA.

“I think the frittata we made at the state competition was the best one we made by far because there were no fluffy edges,” Jennings said. “I think we did exceptionally well.”

The team baked the frittata at 425 degrees in a conventional oven. Jennings said the state event was the first time the team used a conventional oven to make the frittata after using a convection oven to make previous frittatas, including the one that finished first in the Jr. Chef District Competition in November 2023 at the CTC and secured the team’s spot in the state event.

Hogan said the team baked the sweet potatoes first and then combined the remaining ingredients on a sheet pan and finished it in the oven. The change from a convection oven to a conventional oven also meant the team had to alter the length of cooking time because they only had 75 minutes to complete the dish, as opposed to 90 minutes at the district event.

This is the second year Beatty, Hogan and Jennings have worked together. They also work regularly with David Akwaowo. Their partnership gained traction in their first year and has only gotten stronger in year two. Hogan, a senior at New Hope High School, said it is important that he, Beatty and

Jennings, who are juniors at New Hope High, communicate, get along and work well together.

In fact, the judges at the district event praised Beatty, Hogan and Jennings for their teamwork, which was even more crucial at the state meet due to all the adjustments they had to make.

“Chef Richardson says a lot that you probably won’t work with people you get along with every time,” Jennings said, “but it is definitely important to find someone you can work who is at least bearable.”

“Are you calling us bearable?” Beatty quipped.

Jennings smiled because he knew Beatty was joking. Their ability to chide each other and to finish each other’s sentences shows just how well they work together.

It wasn’t until it was time to flip the pan onto the cutting board that Beatty, Hogan and Jennings realized how well they did.

“It was a home run for us,” Hogan said. “It came out perfectly and it was definitely a weight lifted off our shoulders.”

Hogan said the team did extra preparation the night before the state competition at the CTC and then talked with Richardson about what temperature they needed to set a conventional oven if they had to use one. They said they didn’t know what equipment would be at their disposal at the state event until they arrived at the location.

“Chef Richardson really helped out with finalizing our plan and how we were going to do everything efficiently,” Hogan said. “I think that was a huge part of why we did so well.”

Beatty, Hogan and Jennings said it will be an honor and a great responsibility to represent the state of Mississippi at the national event. Each student said he is looking forward to the trip and to see what dishes the other teams will make. As a team, they’re looking forward to taking another step in their development from burnt toast beginners to maturing master chefs.

“I think it is going to be a blast considering we are such close friends,” Hogan said. “That is the other nice thing in that this is a team built off of a friendship rather than an obligation to culinary. We hang out together outside of school all the time, so this is going to be a vacation to us as much as it is going to be a competition.”