

Jonathan Jennings thought his undefeated run had ended.

The New Hope High School junior admits there were a few anxious moments at the most recent SkillsUSA State Championship, including when he learned he had to substitute Arborio rice for orzo in his lemon chicken soup. The switch meant Jennings needed more time to cook the rice. As a result, he exceeded the allotted time to complete his dishes and had points deducted from his score.

The deduction may have convinced Jennings he wasn't going to win the Culinary Arts competition.

"I was confident I was going to at least get third or fourth," Jennings said.

Jennings' thinking changed when he didn't hear his name called at fourth or third. Imagine his surprise when his name was finally called as the gold medal winner.

"I was super shocked to get first because I looked at everyone else's dishes and they all looked good and delicious," Jennings said.

Jennings' gold-medal performance at a SkillsUSA event was the fourth in the history of the Lowndes County School District's Career Technology Center. Brady Hogan, John Beatty, Kenyon Edmond, Baylee Wyers and Ben Cooper earned silver medals for their performance in Quiz Bowl, while Michaela Rixie (Baking and Pastry Arts) and Kaylyn Honnell (Job Demonstration Open) earned bronze medals.

Winners from each event qualified to compete at the SkillsUSA National Leadership and Skills Conference in June in Atlanta. SkillsUSA is a career-development student organization that highlights and fosters career skills students will need when they enter the workforce.

Chef Victoria Richardson said the CTC also had competitors in team fabrication in carpentry, electrical wiring, restaurant service and promotional billboards. She said this year marked the first time the CTC had a first-year student (Honnell) place and medal at the district and state competitions. In all, 21 CTC students participated in the state competition.

Richardson credited Jennings for remaining calm through the transition from orzo to rice and making dishes that were “very, very creative.”

“He recovered quite well and did a fabulous job,” Richardson said. “He was ahead of everybody at the beginning of the competition, so when he had to do all of his gear switching, it really helped him.”

Jennings started by breaking down a chicken and using the carcass to make a stock for his soup. He then took the chicken tenders and made a grilled Romaine salad with an emulsified honey vinaigrette, grilled chicken and homemade croutons. For the entree, Jennings made a pan-sautéed chicken cutlet with herb pan sauce, smashed red potatoes and balsamic green beans. The work took a little more than three hours.

Richardson said the judges referred to Jennings’ soup as “the best out of the whole day.”

Jennings credited Richardson for her help in planning and praised her for encouraging and supporting students throughout the year.

“She gives us a lot of work, but she still is always pushing us to do our best,” Jennings said. “She is very passionate about what she does, and she gets very excited about what she does. Does she overwork herself? Yeah, but the fact she is so willing to do that for us really shows me – and I hope it shows other kids in the classroom – she does care.”

Hogan, a senior at New Hope High, hopes the younger competitors on his Quiz Bowl team will learn from the experience and come back stronger next year.

“We were shooting for third place after our first round,” Hogan said. “We barely made the cut-in for the qualifying round and we only needed to get one point there, which we did. On the last question, the team that was in second got it wrong and we got it right, so we switched places.

“It was a very enjoyable experience. The team did very well and everybody chipped in.”

Rixie made a Dutch Apple pie, chocolate chip cookies, biscuits and had to ice and decorate a cake in three and a half hours. She said there was “a whole lot of back and forth” during the competition but that she was “thrilled” with how she did. Last year, she finished second at the competition.

Jennings said the SkillsUSA competition gives him confidence that he, Hogan and Beatty will do well next month when they participate in the Southeast Junior Chef Competition in Nashville, Tennessee. It also will give him a chance to complete an undefeated run through the school year.

The team, whose nickname is “Burnt Toast”, won the Junior Chef State Finals Competition in January in Jackson 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.

“I think we will do great,” Jennings said. “I feel our recipe at Nashville will be just as good as it has been the previous times. I think once we do it again it will be even better than the last time. I have a lot of confidence in my teammates that they will do great. I am not really

stressing about it anymore. We're going to Nashville. I have never been to Nashville. I am just going to have fun and enjoy it."