

Cook-off keeps tradition alive while raising money

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Mitch LeClair photo

Shannon Lancaster of Echo delivers another serving of her entry in the Chuckwagon Cafe's seventh annual Dutch oven cook-off Saturday in Hermiston. J.D. Lancaster, Shannon's brother-in-law and resident of Hermiston, works in the background.



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By MITCH LECLAIR Hermiston Herald |

More than a half dozen teams carried on trail-trekking tradition Saturday morning at the Chuckwagon Cafe's seventh annual Dutch oven cook-off.

With all plate-buying attendees ballots compiled and counted, Cathy Stolz, manager of the Chuckwagon, announced Larry Ross of Hermiston and his team as the People's Choice champions and winners of \$100 in cash.

The Ross team's dish of barbecue pork ribs and baked beans nudged the trailmaster's beans made by John Nichols, the Umatilla resident who won second place and took home a \$50 gift certificate to the Chuckwagon Cafe, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

In a time of tight wallets, it was perhaps Hermiston Boy Scout Troop 679 and the Umatilla cheerleaders that came out on top, as the groups raised nearly \$1,500 from a 30-minute, 30-item auction and hundreds more from two concession stands.

Stolz also announced that the Walmart distribution center south of Hermiston donated \$500 to the cook-off's beneficiary groups, who, along with the Buttercreek Boys band, kept the crowd happy while they waited for lunch to start at noon.

The list of culinary entries in Saturday's event read like a dream to any lover of made-from-scratch, home-cooked dishes: jambalaya, cheese biscuits, hominy, pork loin and chops, dinner rolls and kielbasa covered in zucchini teased the crowd's taste-buds.

Shannon Lancaster of Echo said she discovered Dutch-oven cooking when she went hunting as a child.

Her party would bury one of the cast-iron ovens with hot coals in the morning and return to a freshly cooked, hot lunch after noon.

Lancaster said past experiments in Dutch-oven cooking have resulted in red velvet cake, crawfish dishes and even donuts.

"I got out of it and raised some kids, but now we're back in it," she said.

Lancaster said her next addition to her collection of seven Dutch ovens will be an aluminum model, which she'll use to make ice cream.

Her brother-in-law from Hermiston, J.D. Lancaster, cooked and competed in the adjacent improvised kitchen spot Saturday.

J.D. said he began his first cook-off experience by starting his barbecue pork loin around 8:30 a.m.

He got his start two years ago, Lancaster said, when a friend suggested he take a look at the High Desert Dutch Oven Club, an enthusiast group based in Hermiston.

Now, after falling in love with the method, Lancaster owns a collection of Dutch ovens ranging from an 8-inch -diameter baby to a 6-gallon monster.

Ryan Heath and Adam Willard — a team of cousins from Pendleton — prepared a "Ragin' Cajun Jambalaya" and a hunter's stew.

"Sometimes it's perfect," Heath said to a few inquiring tasters before the dinner bell rang. "Other times you wish it was perfect."

According to Heath, Dutch ovens were one of the first portable cooking devices able to be mass produced.

This, along with the ovens' versatility as "cowboy stoves" — Willard said cooks can use them like a burner on a stove or a flat grill — aided the adoption of the ovens by settlers moving west to Utah, Idaho and Oregon.

Georgia Carr, a Kennewick resident who moved west from Iowa two months ago, made a hominy dish complete with chilies and garlic and cheese biscuits on the side.

Jim Meeks of Hermiston, a returning competitor in the Chuckwagon's contest, made a kielbasa and zucchini pot.

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