Palms MS student stirs passion for cooking with ‘Chopped Junior’ appearance

by Ellen Morgan | Jan 30, 2017 | Achievements, Arts, Personal story | 0 comments

Start with a tight-knit family, then add a measure of self-discipline and a passion for cooking and you have the ingredients that earned a Palms Middle School student a spot on the Food Network's popular show, "Chopped Junior."

Jayla Hill, a 13-year-old eighth-grader, made it to the finals of the episode that aired Dec. 27, while she and her schoolmates were on winter break. Although she had taped the show sixth months earlier, she couldn't divulge how the fast-paced competition turned out.
Jayla recalled that she and her dad were binge-watching Food Network shows last year, when “Chopped Junior” came on. The show features four young competitors who are given a basket of “mystery” ingredients and given 30 minutes to prepare a creative dish. One competitor is eliminated or “chopped” after each of the three rounds.

“I could do that,” Jayla told herself, and she went on-line and applied to be on the show. By May, she was boarding a plane to New York, where the episode titled “Hot Potato, Not Potato” was taped.

For the first round, Jayla and the other competitors were given a basket filled with ground beef, spinach, chive blossoms and presidential chocolates, and directed to make an appetizer.

“I made a ground-beef taco with a chocolate Mexican crème sauce and coleslaw,” Jayla said. “You really have to concentrate and focus because you have only 30 minutes to make your dish.”

Jayla’s creation won kudos from the panel of judges, and she progressed to the entrée round. Her version of pork tenderloin with Mousseron mushrooms and Thumbelina carrots earned her a slot in the dessert finale.

To the mystery basket of trail mix, gelatin parfait, whipped honey and red delicious apples, Jayla added licorice – a flavor that didn’t sit well with the judges. A 13-year-old boy from New York took home the “Chopped Junior” crown, and the $10,000 prize.

Jayla took the experience in stride, and is now moving forward with her plan to start her own series of cooking classes for kids.

“You just have to learn how to take criticism and learn from it,” she said. “You have to take the good with the bad and next time I will do better. Although I didn’t win, I learned some valuable lessons that will help me to propel my business.”

Now that the pressure is off, Jayla can get back to the dishes she loves to make. She was inspired and taught by her great-grandmother, grandmother and mother – all of whom come from Belize – so is accomplished at whipping up shrimp and grits, fried chicken, steak and mashed potatoes and coconut tarts.

“Jayla’s skills and practice in the kitchen have made my life easier and less hectic with her helping and cooking in the kitchen,” said her mother, Jacqueline Lopez.

Strong family, self-discipline and a passion for cooking: talk about a recipe for success.