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Johnson: It's a scramble to the finish

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You always have to go about this life learning things. There is, I believe, spectacle even in the most mundane things. If you keep your eyes open.

The idea on this particular morning was a simple one: Make breakfast for your parents. There were six children involved, and they went at it. And I do mean *went at it*.

You have not truly lived, I must say, until you have witnessed a gang of 7- and 10-year-olds try to scramble eggs.

The six were: Natasha Hill, 11, Juliette Hill, 10, and Marissa Wendt, 11, all of Irvine; Johnny Wolfgang Knoke, 7, of San Juan Capistrano; Alexander Moshir, 10, of Yorba Linda; and Malkiah Alberts, 10, of Huntington Beach.

They were selected by chef and restaurateur Zov Karamardian from 60 children who submitted to her a video of them preparing a dish, part of her Best Kid Chef 2013 competition, from which the winner would receive a \$1,000 savings bond to help pay for college.

They gathered on Thursday morning in the kitchen of Zov's Bistro, Karamardian's restaurant in Tustin, each of them nervous as if they were standing before a hanging judge. This promised fun.

"Kind of," Malkiah said when I asked if she was nervous. "I sometimes get stage fright."

A fifth-grader, she had made the cut by putting together Wheat Thins tacos. I asked the same thing.

It seems you take Wheat Thins, some lettuce, tomato, beef and cover it all with Easy Cheese, that culinary confection in a spray can. She had made it awhile ago for a couple of friends who loved it. Her mother, Marlie, saw an advertisement for the competition on the internet, set up a camera and Malkiah went to work.

"I just like doing this for fun," the girl told me as she waited, cautioning me that she does not by any means intend to be a chef when she grows up.

OK, I told her. What does she want to be?

"A forensic anthropologist," she said.

"She loves rocks," Marlie Alberts explained, shrugging her shoulders.

There is a reason children do not cook for you in a restaurant. On this morning, they are all over the place.

'Herding cats,' is what I jotted in my notebook as I watched Karamardian dash between the stove and the various prep stations where she had placed the children inside the tight confines of the cooking area.

Egg yolks flew. Hash browns went splat on the floor.

How no one was burned from the hot skillets or gut-gouged by a knife I will never understand.

"Watch your fingers!" Karamardian shouted repeatedly as she dashed about.

As kids and chefs flailed about him, I noticed Alexander calmly and quite deftly taking a red bell pepper apart and reducing it to even julienned slices. He stopped and looked up at me with an expression that said, What? You want me to teach *you*?

"I learned this by watching 'Iron Chef' and 'Chopped,'" he finally said before getting back to the task before him.

"Scary," Juliette said, trying to concentrate amid the chaos while carefully tending to a pan of eggs. "You just don't want to hurt yourself."

Her eggs, which she has topped with cheese, tomato and basil, are finished perfectly.

It isn't until Karamardian summons help from her pasty chef, Michelle Bracken, that the chaos eases. She calms 7-year-old Johnny, who is rather wildly wielding a knife he is supposed to be using on a few zucchinis.

"Hey, I do this all the time!" the boy protests. "I've been helping my dad in his catering business since I was 5!"

His father, Phil Knoke, who goes by the name "O.C. Rock 'N' Roll Chef, backs up Johnny, who prefers the name Wolfy.

"He was serving at 3 better than some of my chefs on the line," he says. "And he can pull flavors out of meals better than a lot of my guys."

The winner of the competition finally is named. It is Marissa.

She deserved it.

Watching the video she submitted, you at times forget the person putting together the strawberry lemonade meringue pie is an 11-year-old. It was edited precisely, featured captioning and, more to the point, was so well done it seemed possible for even a failed baker like me to make the pie.

Also, she is a kid with her own internet baking show, sugarnoms.com.

"I just started it in November," Marissa said. "I get inspired by professionals who do it."

So she gets no help?

"She invents her own recipes," her mother, Maryanne said. "I just hold the camera."

In the end, I was glad I went. Amid the mess and fury of that morning I, indeed, learned something.

It isn't just that in 20 or so years we all will be shelling out top dollar to eat at Wolfy Knoke's restaurant, but that I finally learned how to scramble and cook eggs properly.

Zov Karamardian, though she doesn't know it, taught me that.

It is all in the wrist, people, and the tilt of the pan.

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