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LIFE FOOD

FOOD

Eugene chef wins game of 'Cutthroat'





Eugene chef Brian Hammarstedt placed first in an edition of the television cooking contest "Cutthroat Kitchen."

BY JOANNA BARTLETT

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Challenges and change aren't new to Eugene chef Brian Hammarstedt. Raised by a single mother, he moved around a lot as a kid, living in several different states on his journey to adulthood. He's even sabotaged himself a few times.

Perhaps those experiences gave him a leg up on the competition during his appearance on the Food Network's "Cutthroat Kitchen" in June.

The cooking competition, hosted by Alton Brown, gives four chefs the chance to win up to \$25,000 in a three-round elimination battle. To make things interesting, each round features at least one wacky sabotage that contestants bid on to undermine their opponents. The more you bid from your \$25,000 potential prize money, the less you walk away with if you win.

"It was very intimidating at first," 30-year-old Hammarstedt says. "You have to weigh out the pros and cons. When it comes to 'Cutthroat Kitchen,' you never know what's coming at you."

What came at Hammarstedt was a sabotage in every round. In the first round, he was forced to shop for ingredients for spinach artichoke dip while wearing his basket — decorated with artichoke leaves — as his hat. It didn't faze him.

"I knew what I could take and knew what I couldn't take," he says.

Which meant that when the next sabotage was auctioned — the winner replaced the other three chefs' artichoke hearts with inferior ingredients — he knew he had to have the winning bid.

It was worth it, as he wasn't sent home. The rest of the competition proceeded similarly. In the second round, he had to prep ingredients for stromboli on a pizza paddle held by one of his opponents. But he held his own and stayed in the competition.

In the third round, he had to mix all his ingredients in a saxophone.

"Some of the sabotages come out of left field and have no place in the kitchen. And yet we're expected to overcome this challenge and make not only a palatable dish, but a beautiful looking dish," he says. "If it's the right sabotage, it can send the best of the best home."

But Hammarstedt didn't go home — at least not until after he won the show with \$13,600.

"My goal was to leave with at least half," of the initial \$25,000, he says.

The sabotages weren't the only surprise. Being invited on the show was unexpected. "I got a phone call one day and it was the producers of Food Network. My wife knows I have a passion for food and applied for me behind my back. Next thing I know I'm doing a Skype interview and they're flying me out to California."

"We were watching an episode of 'Cutthroat Kitchen' and I knew in every part of me that he could compete in it and win, so I signed him up for it," says Hammarstedt's wife, Jessica.

The episode, "The Waffle Truth," was filmed in December and aired on June 21. Keeping quiet about it for six months was a challenge. "Every day was torture," he says. "To achieve something so big and have to keep it hush hush." He's the first chef from Eugene to win "Cutthroat Kitchen," he says.

Hammarstedt's professional cooking experience began as a steakhouse line cook. He worked his way up to sous chef at Montana Steak House, where he met his wife after she asked to speak with the chef. He's also worked as a private chef and at Marché at Fifth Street Public Market.

Hammarstedt is currently finishing up an associate's degree in business management at Lane Community College and plans to open a food cart in the next few months. He's still deciding on his menu, but knows one thing for sure — he won't be mixing ingredients in a saxophone.

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