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Chicago chef eyes spot on U.S. national team for upcoming global pastry competition

Chicago chef Toni Roberts will compete later this year for a spot on the national team for the ultimate test of culinary skill in Lyon, France, in 2027.



On floor 9 1/2 of the swanky University Club of Chicago, chef Toni Roberts centers a chocolate-peanut butter pudding on a gleaming white plate. She adds a silver-dollar size graham cracker crisp and tops it off with a spiral of cocoa marshmallow “fluff.”

A soft roar, as Roberts tickles the fluff with a blue flame to caramelize the sugar. It all feels very delicate, genteel. But in a few days — if not already — Roberts will break out the big guns. Chocolate is arriving from France, 75 kilos, weighing about as much as a small man.

Roberts needs this to practice making her chocolate “showpiece,” which she’ll unveil during an eight-hour competition Sept. 6, at Kennedy-King College’s Washburne Culinary & Hospitality Institute, where she’ll be competing for one of four spots on the U.S. Pastry Team.

The ultimate goal is to make it to the Coupe du Monde de la Pâtisserie — the world cup of pastry, in Lyon, France, in 2027. There, in a cauldron-like arena, some of the world’s top pastry chefs work for 10 hours straight, dreaming up stunning creations, all while the audience members chant, blow horns, bellow out their country’s national anthem.



“Denali” is peanut dacquoise surrounded by a dark milk chocolate and peanut butter crèmeux and topped with a graham cracker-flavored chocolate crisp and semifreddo coated in cocoa marshmallow fluff and torched. The dessert, by pastry chef Toni Roberts, is served with a warm graham sauce.

Anthony Vazquez/Sun-Times

For now, Roberts is focused on making the national team — also a grueling feat. Nine chefs from across the country competing for four spots. Eight hours, nonstop. Bathroom breaks are allowed, but not necessarily recommended.

Roberts, previously the executive pastry chef at The Ritz-Carlton Chicago, grew up in a little town in Ohio, where she liked to bake with both of her grandmothers. Much of her early inspiration came from watching the TV show, “Great Chefs of America.”

“I knew to watch the last 10 minutes to see the dessert portion,” Roberts said.

A highlight of her career so far includes cooking at the White House for a President Barack Obama state dinner.

“I got to spend a little bit of time in their pastry kitchen, which is crazy to get to: You have to go up these little spiral steps and everything has to be brought up on a dumbwaiter,” she said.

Oddly, perhaps, Roberts says she doesn’t have a “massive sweet tooth.”



One of Roberts’ chocolate creations for a Valentine’s Day display. Provided

“So when I’m not at work I’m not necessarily eating dessert,” she said. “I like to have a bite and try it. I burn out really quick. But I’ll eat a whole bag of chips.”

Roberts says she’s not overly stressed about the upcoming competition. Perhaps not, but the chocolate-peanut butter pudding she plated for this reporter has been tweaked eight times, she said.

Roberts must also prepare a frozen-fruit dessert and the chocolate showpiece — which is where the 75 kilos of fine French chocolate comes in. Her required theme: cultural heritage.

Roberts is planning a four-foot-tall National Park tableau, with piled-up stones, a picnic table, squirrels and a giant redwood tree — all made entirely of chocolate.

En-Ming Hsu was part of the only U.S. team to take first place in 2001. The Japanese are the two-time defending champions.



A miniature version of the trophy the U.S. team won for taking first place in the 2001 Club Coupe Du Monde De La Patisserie. Provided

“You want a judge to look at your piece and say, ‘How did they do that?’” said Hsu, who now lives in Las Vegas but was a pastry chef at The Ritz-Carlton Chicago when she won.

With the whole world watching, anything and everything can go wrong, Hsu said. The judges — all top pastry chefs — deduct points for anything from discolored chocolate to portions that aren’t identical in weight and, on rare occasions, for cheating. For example, someone might sneak in a premade cookie they need for a garnish. With a few exceptions, everything must be prepared on the day of the competition.

And if you get caught?

“Huge point deduction,” Hsu said.

In 2001, the U.S. team had one hour to prepare its kitchen for the next day’s competition. Unfortunately, they didn’t get any help from the Italian team, which had just competed. “Italy trashed the kitchen,” Hsu recalled. “At that time, that was just a massive panic.”

Once the competition got under way, Hsu didn’t stop to eat or even pay a visit to the bathroom, she said. Twenty-four years later, that single-minded focus hasn’t changed.

“If you have to go, you have to go, but it’s not a lolly-gagging time,” Roberts says, adding that she doesn’t plan to break for lunch. “I’m going to probably treat it like a marathon and carb-load the night before.”

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