

The Record-Argus

Monday, April 2, 2012

Founded 1848 ❖ Greenville, Pa. 16125

60 Cents



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Cheri DiGregorio of Transfer, left, Melissa Eynon of Jamestown, center, and Debbra Canter of the Gallery Grille all prepare for public participants to try their chili, during Greenville Moose and Mercer County Literacy Council's Eighth Annual Chili Cook-Off competition, Saturday at Greenville Moose Lodge. DiGregorio and her husband, Todd won the overall competition by taking first place.

Chili Champs

DiGregorios, IlSCO team take home crowns

By BEN WILLIAMSON
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As soon as you opened the door to the Greenville Moose Family Center 276 Saturday, the smell of beans and meat wafted through the air, right to your brain, but not before your stomach told you that you were in the right place.

You were entering the Eighth Annual Mercer County Chili Cook-Off, an important fundraiser for the Mercer County Literacy Council, and you weren't about to be disappointed if you like chili, and most of all, chili of all types.

All in all, there were 12 chili contestants competing



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Winners of this year's People's Choice Award for the Greenville Moose and Mercer County Literacy Council's Eighth Annual Chili Cook-off pose with their prize winning Texas-style chili, Saturday, at the Greenville Moose Lodge. From left to right are Kevin Jenkins, Gary Jones, and John Thigpen from IlSCO Extrusions Inc.

for first place and bragging rights of having the best chili recipe in the county.

Some of the contestants were returning participants and some were competing

for the very first time. The crew of Vickie "Butcher" Clarke, from Greenville, was there for their third year in a row and admitted they may not have the best

chili in the house but the duo has a lot of fun cooking together.

"We may not have the winning recipe," Butcher said. "But, it's an old Croatian recipe that is always the first one gone."

Which proved true, because before the judging took place, their entire 16 quarts of Croatian Chili was gone.

For another group of entrants it was their first year competing and they decided to bring some southern taste with them. The cook — Kevin Jenkins, vice president of operations for IlSCO Extrusions.

When local IlSCO managers Gary Jones and John Thigpen heard about the event they decided to volunteer Jenkins, a Texas native, as their cook. Jenkins said he prepared two chilis: one a red Texas Chili, and

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the second a green Mexican Chili, with pork as its meat.

"We're proud to help the community," Jenkins said. "We want to be good corporate citizens, especially for such a good cause."

And a good cause it was. Between entry fees, a 50/50 raffle, local business contributions, and money raised by the public's votes, the Literacy Council raised around \$4,500. Rick Peterson, chairperson of the Literacy Council said the money is especially appreciated this year because of state grant cuts. He said they use the money to buy supplies for their students when they're needed.

At the end of the day, it all came down to personal taste. Some people like their chili spicy, some like it sweet, some traditional, and some like it green. Stella Barrett, from Greenville said she liked the green chili of Jenkins.

"They are all good and some are a little warmer than others," Barrett said. "I like the chili of the Stony Point Grange group but I also like the one of the guy from Texas."

Another person had a favorite depending on texture.

"I liked the chili of Todd and Cheri DiGregorio," Deb Thompson of Greenville said. "It had a really good flavor and nice texture."

In the end the best chili of the county was determined using two different methods. First, three judges tasted each chili using a blind taste test to determine the overall winner. Secondly, members of the public put money in a donation can on each participants table. Whoever collected the most money at the end of the day, received first place for "people's choice."

After the judges tasted all 12 chilis, they conclusively decided that Todd and Cheri DiGregorio's chili deserved first place for this year.

The judges also awarded three other awards: Best Decorated went to Cindy Glass of Greenville, whose chicken chili had a unique look; Best Restaurant went to Gallery Grille, whose full-time cook Debbra Canter, and waitress Missy Kilgore prepared; and Best Organized went to Classy Chili Peppers, a group of Literacy Council students who decided to give the event a try.

The People's Choice Award went to IlSCO Extrusions, who brought some Texas flavor to Greenville, but they narrowly edged the Women of the Moose's chili by a few dollars.

Overall, the event was successful in raising money for an organization Daniel Durst, Vice President of the board of directors of the Literacy Council believes is not as much a charity, as it is an investment for our future.

"It's tough for men in this area, who've worked in factories their entire lives to admit they need help to get an education," Durst said. "The Literacy Council helped me obtain my GED and I'll be graduating soon with an associates degree from Penn State."

Durst said he had to go back to school after losing four manufacturing jobs in the area after they went out of business.

"A guy could run a machine for 15 years at a factory and get along fine," Durst said. "Now you have to have more credentials just to get hired."

Durst said by helping people become better educated through the Literacy Council we're investing in our community's future.