



Changing the Hospital Food Game: Chefs Showcase Plant-Based Creativity at D.C. Event

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Roasted sesame chickpeas over zesty quinoa. Jeweled rice with sautéed vegetables. Barbecued jackfruit sandwich with edamame and black bean salad. If these entrées sound like something you'd order off a trendy restaurant menu, that's the idea. The chefs who created them brought their skills and creativity to the inaugural Healthy Hospital Chef Challenge to illustrate that hospital food—long associated with meatloaf, chicken nuggets, and Jell-O—can be nourishing, visually appealing, and delicious.

The competition, held in Washington, D.C., on August 15 before an audience of 400 health care professionals, capped the first day of the three-day International Conference on Nutrition in Medicine, hosted by Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. Thirty-two entrants threw their chefs' hats into the ring, and three finalists—all culinary professionals working in institutional health care settings—were selected to compete in person for the top prize: \$6,000 and the title of Top Healthy Hospital Chef.

Shifting the Paradigm

The standard American diet, with its foundation of meat, dairy, and highly processed foods, has long been reflected in the fare served to patients in hospital settings, despite strong evidence [linking it to negative](#)

[health outcomes](#), including Type 2 diabetes and obesity. While some health care institutions have acknowledged the importance of nutrition in the healing process and have [adopted more nutritionally sound policies](#), bacon, ice cream, and hot dogs are still widely available options. The Healthy Hospital Chef Challenge hopes to shift that paradigm.

“The competition was created to highlight chefs and food service workers who are making efforts to serve flavorful, nutrient-dense plant-based food in their institutions,” says Dustin Harder, the Physicians Committee's culinary specialist and the competition's emcee. “The goal is to inspire and motivate attendees to go back to their organization or local hospital and share about the exciting food they saw come to life in the competition.”

On stage, finalists Skylar Flynn, Anthony Burns, and Chad Wisner prepared their nutritious plant-based entrées using fruits, vegetables, leafy greens, whole grains, legumes, and—if they were inclined—tofu and tempeh. Each dish had to contain at least 5 grams of fiber and be low in fat and sodium. All three chefs ran with the challenge, using novel techniques and ingredients to enhance the flavor and nutrient profiles of their dishes.

Tricks of the Trade

Flynn, a food operations manager from San Diego with degrees in culinary nutrition and the pastry arts, served roasted sesame chickpeas with zesty quinoa and a creamy sriracha sauce that featured aquafaba for rich texture. Wisner, an executive chef at a senior living residence in Maryland, served up a barbecue jackfruit sandwich with a tangy coleslaw. And Chef Burns, the culinary lead at St. Luke's Medical Center in Milwaukee, showed the audience how to create the unique spice blend that gave their dish—jeweled rice and sautéed vegetables with a harissa-mint sauce—a delicious depth of flavor.

Each chef, with the help of a kitchen assistant, was still

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roasting, steaming, and sautéing until the last possible moment, plating and serving their dishes just before time was called. After deliberating, guest judges Shawn Matijevich of the [Institute of Culinary Education](#), Beets by Brooke creator Brooklynne Palmer, and Emmet McDonough of Sodexo NYC Health + Hospitals crowned Burns and their flavorful rice dish the winner.

A Winning Proposition

Burns' entrée hit every [criteria for a winning dish](#), including ease of preparation, health benefits, taste, and presentation. Channeling the flavors of the Middle East, the basmati rice was infused with aromatic Persian spices and studded with almonds and raisins, while the accompanying melange of chickpeas and vegetables were napped in a piquant harissa sauce.

Wisner and Flynn, who earned second- and third-place titles, respectively, took home cash prizes and a surprise gift of stainless steel cookware sets.

For at least one chef, simply getting to participate in the event was a win in itself. "Plant-forward dishes are the future of feeding patients flavorful meals while providing fuel and function to their bodies," said runner-up Flynn. "It is an honor to be part of this competition with like-minded people who see the importance of bringing plant-forward dishes into hospitals."

Anyone who wants to recreate the winning dish or either of the two runners-up can find them in the Physicians Committee's [Healthy Hospital Program Patient Recipe Book](#).