

# De La Salle junior matches herbs with TV chef Bobby Flay

By BETH DONZE

Emile Stieffel IV already has a few impressive distinctions to list on his professional resumé:

For the past two years, the De La Salle High junior's sweet and smoky barbecued chicken has earned first-place at the Great Algiers Barbeque Cook-off.

And last July, Emile and his father, professional New Orleans Chef Emile Stieffel III, squared off against world-famous Master Chef Bobby Flay in a jambalaya cook-off for the Food Network series "Throwdown with Bobby Flay." The episode, filmed at Blaine Kern's Mardi Gras World, aired last September on the Food Network.

"When I was about 6, my dad decided he wanted me to start cooking dinners," recalled Emile, whose parents and older sister Michelle were gaining quite a local following by garnering first place at the Jambalaya Festival Cook-off in Gonzales multiple times.

"The first things I learned to cook were jambalaya, macaroni and cheese, and eggs. It went in the order of what my favorite food was," Emile said, noting that he is an instinctual cook rather than one who follows a recipe verbatim.

"Whatever I see or I taste that I like, I try to make, and if I don't like a certain ingredient, I'll try to switch that out with something else," said Emile of his creative approach to cooking. "I would go to a restaurant and ask for a hamburger, and it would come out burnt. I remember wishing that I could go back (to the kitchen) and make it right," said Emile, noting that he learned the secret behind a great burger – adding onion, cooked bacon, raw garlic and teriyaki sauce to the meat – from his sister's boyfriend.

Detecting his son's fledgling interest in cooking, Emile Stieffel III began taking Emile to work with him at his business, Aurora Catering in Algiers, at age 10 as a helper on weekends. The young Emile was soon turning out pans of herbal chicken pasta.

"I'm mostly the grill person," Emile said. "If my dad needs something grilled, I'll do it. I tend to do very well."

His experience as a grill chef came in handy when the then 14-year-old Emile and his cousin entered the 2005 Great Algiers Barbeque Cook-off. The duo took first place "overall" for their barbecued chicken that year, and first place in the "chicken" category in the 2006 competition.

"It's all in the barbeque sauce," Emile noted. "My cousin brings in lots of what he likes and I bring what I like, and we just kind of throw it into a bucket and mix it up," said the 16-year-old, who doctors up his hybrid sauce with apple cider, hot sauce, garlic and thyme before basting half-chickens that are pre-marinated in a brine and smoke-flavor solution.

"The sauce is spicy enough to

give it a kick and it's sweet," he said. "And the apple cider keeps the chicken juicy."

Emile has shared his culinary talents with his friends and fellow classmates over the years, preparing South and Central American-inspired dishes for his Spanish classes as an elementary school student at Arden Cahill Academy, and each year challenging himself to "make something different."

More recently, Emile helped his best friend make his girlfriend a dinner of herbal chicken pasta, a relatively inexpensive one-pan dish in which chicken breasts are fried down in olive oil and onions, spiked with a number of dry seasonings, and tossed in with warm pasta.

"When my friends find out that I cook, they're like, 'Oh my God, you cook?'" Emile said. "It's really not that tough! I guess how long it takes to cook certain dishes kind of scares them a bit."

**EMILE'S** composure in the kitchen came into play last summer, when his father, a four-time winner of the Jambalaya Festival's jambalaya cook-off, was invited to pit his version of jambalaya against that of Bobby Flay in a nationally televised cook-off. For the friendly battle, Emile helped his father prepare a 20-gallon pot of his trademark chicken, sausage and tasso jambalaya. The Stieffels' award-winning recipe for the spicy rice-based dish beat out Flay's version of jambalaya.

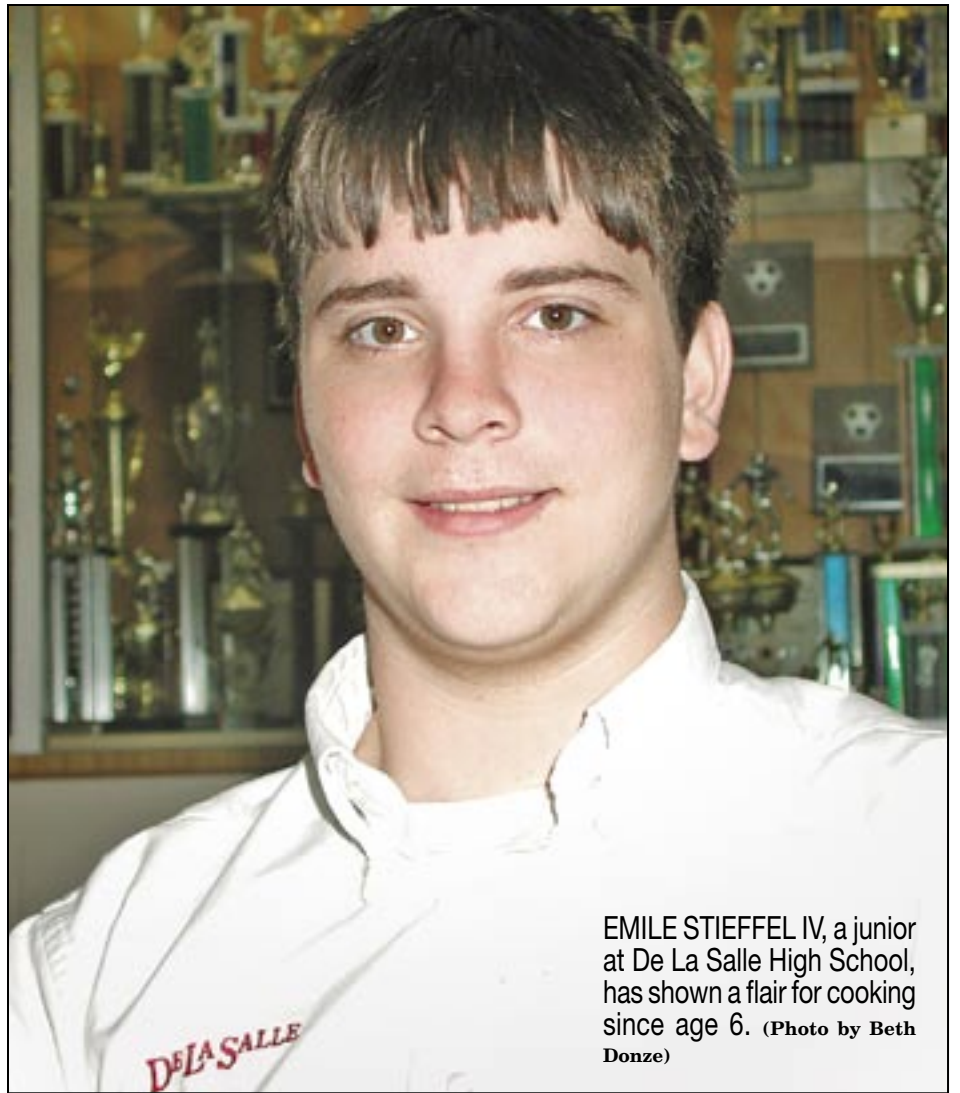
"(Flay) made more of a seafood paella. He really didn't know how to cook authentic jambalaya at all," said Emile, who hopes to follow in his father's professional footsteps. "I can learn to cook Cajun through my dad, but I want to be able to cook different things," he said.

Some of Emile's recent favorites to prepare are Middle Eastern dishes such as chicken and beef shwarma, baba ganoush and salat bathinjan – all inspired by meals he has enjoyed at Lebanon's Café, one of his favorite restaurants – and bacon-wrapped chicken stuffed with spinach soufflé, something the teenager was spurred to make after watching a similar dish prepared on "Good Morning America."

Emile said that after grilling, making desserts is his favorite kitchen pursuit, with his specialties including pineapple upside-down cake and cookies. For a recent French class at De La Salle, Emile prepared Bananas Foster on site.

"We decided that the Spanish class shouldn't be the only one allowed to bring in food," Emile said, grinning. "I brought in a pan and all the ingredients and cooked it in class. You could smell it all the way down the hall. Let's just say that word got around quickly," said Emile, who heartily agrees with the old adage that says "the messier the kitchen, the better tasting the meal."

"When I'm cooking," he said, "things tend to fling out of the pot!"



EMILE STIEFFEL IV, a junior at De La Salle High School, has shown a flair for cooking since age 6. (Photo by Beth Donze)



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