Teen chef refines skills in Richland

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By Aimee Chou, Herald staff writer

Tressia Nowlin can dice a vegetable with geometric precision, and she has a third-place finish at a recent Los Angeles “Best Teen Chef” competition to prove it.

But after returning home, the 17-year-old wasn't sure where she'd further develop her talent. Then came a call from Penny Morgan, president of the upscale Tagaris Winery in Richland.

Morgan offered her a job as a garmishe - one who makes appetizers - at the Taverna Tagaris restaurant.

"I just couldn't get her out of my mind," said Morgan, who had read a Herald story this spring about the promising teen's upcoming competition at the Art Institute of California.

"She gives us a higher calling, for the community to participate in training those that come out of our backyard," Morgan said.

Under chef Chris Ainsworth's tutelage, Nowlin makes asparagus and pancetta, crisp flatbread and meze plates for a hungry crowd.

Unlike the solo cooking before judges, "speed and quality" in the fast-paced restaurant business is about team synchrony.

"I learn even from the waitresses and waiters, and work with the cooks and dishwashers. You don't have to talk; it's a read-your-mind kind of thing," Nowlin said.

The recent Richland High School graduate has come a long way from the kid who made "smokebombs" microwaving cookie dough and Cheetos together. She dreams of being a cooking show host and carving ice and sugar sculptures.

But she had a reason to be nervous before the Los Angeles competition's slicing demonstration.

The girl before her cut through her own fingertip.

"She just put stuff on it, wrapped herself up and kept on going - and won second place," Nowlin said.

By the time it was her turn, she was shaking and near-blinded by onions, but was wearing a steel cut-resistant glove.

The test for her and five other semi-finalists: shrimp cocktail, sautéed breast of chicken chasseur, fresh broccoli and rice pilaf. Everything was scrumptious, with one hitch: "I forgot to cook my broccoli."
Improvisation counts, and she used a stalk to garnish a cucumber cup for shrimp cocktail. A week later, she took third at a regional SkillsUSA competition in Tacoma.

Talent grew through education, business and family. In her senior year, Nowlin was a Starbucks barista and enrolled in Dan Dreger's culinary class at the Tri-Tech Skills Center.

She learned to make her gluten-intolerant cousin chocolate pancakes instead of elephant ears. And she has picked up skills from her mother, Nicole Cruise.

"My mom said, 'If you want to do this, do it now.'"

Her Richland High School peers raised more than $300 to fund her trip to L.A. She also has a benefactor in her quest to attend culinary school. Family friend Dee Tadlock has offered to pay for her schooling.

"I can go anywhere I want," she said excitedly.

Her options are the Art Institute of California, which offered her a $500 scholarship, or Italy, the Johnson and Wales College of Culinary Arts, the French Culinary Institute in New York or the Art Institute of America.

"She said in return, I have do it for someone else (in the future)," Nowlin said.