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Graphic designer from California wins Del Monte cook-off

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Miami Herald Staff / Benjamin S. Brasch

Kara Adanalian won the top prize in the Del Monte "Find Your Inner Chef" contest.

Kara Adanalian had been hiding her nerves behind a smile all day, but it fell away as she scanned the contents of a wicker basket that would make or break her next hour. The gastronomic gauntlet had been thrown down.

Refrigerated pie-crust dough. Bell peppers. Tomatoes. Cantaloupe. Avocado. Banana. Jalapeño. Pineapple.

Adanalian and her fellow finalist had one hour to turn the pie crust, two other items from the basket and several ingredients of their choosing into a dish for the five judges

in the final round of Del Monte's "Find Your Inner Chef" National Cook Off.

The cook-off, held Saturday at Miami Dade College's Miami Culinary Institute, was in the style of the Food Network show *Chopped*, on which contestants race the clock to turn a basket of mystery ingredients into a winning dish.

The competition's initial online round, which opened April 15, drew more than 1,000 recipes, said Véronique Vatinelle, marketing manager for Del Monte Fresh Produce, whose North American office is in Coral Gables.

"We just want to give a chance to ordinary people to show off their talents and passion," Vatinelle said.

And Adanalian fits the bill, sort of.

The 57-year-old graphic designer from Fresno, Calif., is a cooking-contest devotee who has won three national contests, one them sponsored by *Fine Cooking* magazine, earning prizes including top-of-the-line kitchen gear, trips to New York and thousands of dollars.

But, she said, the prize she won Saturday tops them all: a four-day trip for two to the Culinary Institute of America's Napa Valley campus.

One of the judges, Miami Culinary Institute director John Richards, said he was impressed with the complex flavors Adalian was able to create in a short time in her winning dish, Red Pepper and Avocado Stuffed Chicken Breast with Pastry Gremolata and White Wine Reduction.

Adalian said marathon Chopped viewing sessions had taught her to focus and to use the mystery items in innovative ways during the cook-off.

She was in the zone, barely looking up as she worked. Once she finished the five judge's plates, she shot her hands up in the air and mouthed the word "Done."

"The cooking part for me was the easy part," she said. "The hardest part was being under the gun."

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