

SUN

A TURLEY PUBLICATION

www.turley.com

Local advertisers.

September 8 - September 14, 2017

City leaders square off in cooking contest

By **Sandra Dias**
Correspondent

HOLYOKE - Mayor Alex B. Morse took home the honor of top chef at a lighthearted cooking competition last week at the Holyoke Farmers' Market.

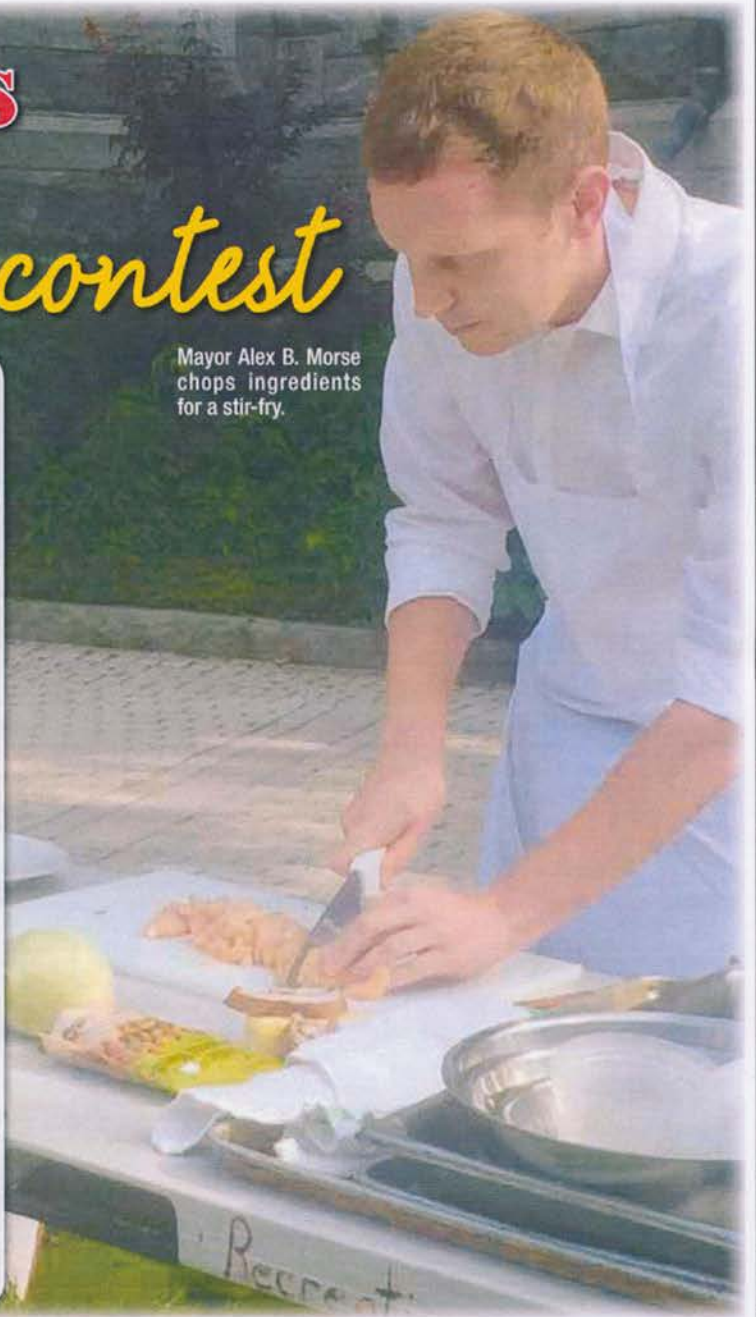
Morse competed against Holyoke Fire Chief John Pond, School Superintendent/Receiver Stephen Zrike, and Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal in a contest designed to highlight the farmers' market, which is held every Thursday afternoon on Dwight Street in Holyoke.

After a few moments of difficulty getting the grills lit, the contestants dashed off, first to a cooler to select a cut of meat to grill, then to a table of seasonings, and finally, off to choose produce from the various farmers to incorporate into their culinary creation. The contestants were only required to use one particular ingredient—chocolate—in their dish.

Morse chose multiple ingredients, including chicken, peppers, summer squash, mushrooms, potatoes, zucchini bread, maple syrup, and more for a secret dish that he promised would be both "sweet and savory."

Zrike grabbed sirloin steak tips, onions, pepper, cilantro, and avocado for his entree while Royal selected chicken, zucchini, onions, kale, and cilantro for a dish that she said, "would keep it healthy."

Mayor Alex B. Morse chops ingredients for a stir-fry.



See COOKING, page 10

COOKING, from page 1

Pond went in the other direction, surprising the crowd when he added cider donuts to his choice of ground beef, cheese, tomato, and Goya Adobo, a commercial seasoning mix that is popular in Puerto Rican cooking. All the contestants ultimately grabbed Adobo, to the cheers of audience members watching the cook-off in front of City Hall.

As the contestants grilled meat and hurriedly chopped vegetables, farmers' market manager Andres Villada milled about, asking viewers what they thought about the food being prepared before them and chatting with the contestants about their cooking. The contestants also engaged in a bit of good-natured ribbing.

"We are looking for creations that are original and taste good, but also use that one required ingredient, which is chocolate," he said. "It's going to be interesting to see what they come up with."

A group of school department employees stood on the sidelines, cheering Zrike on as they held signs of support and shook cheerleading pom-poms.

"We are very happy he is participating," said Lymari Arroyo, a grants department clerk for the schools. "So far, it looks very good and tasty. The ingredients he used are fresh and he's adding some Adobo. I hope he doesn't burn the stuff."

As the 45 minutes of cooking time wound down, Villada stopped by each cooking station to survey the progress. Morse had just completed a chicken stir-fry and had moved on to an accompanying dessert: grilled zucchini bread with fresh peaches and melted chocolate.

"Where did you learn how to cook?" Villada said as he watched Morse confidently drizzle the bread with chocolate.

"From my momma," Morse said with a smile.

The contestants concealed their final creations with silver plate coverings and brought them to the table of judges: State Rep. Aaron Vega, Nuestras Raices chef Neftali Duran, and Ada Fernandez, co-owner of Fernandez Family Restaurant.

Fernandez praised Zrike for not overcooking the steak on an extremely hot grill for his carne asada tacos while Duran, who cooks Mexican food, said the dish was "pretty good."

"I liked the cilantro and avocado, but I wish you would have used a few more local ingredients from the farmers market," he said.

Chief Pond joked that he started melting choco-



Supporters cheer on School Superintendent Stephen Zrike.

late when he saw Zrike melting his for the tacos; Pond ended up drizzling the chocolate over the cider donuts for a dessert, an approach that was somewhat out of bounds with the rules of integrating the chocolate into a main dish.

The judges then marveled about the "abundance" of ingredients that Morse used in his stir-fry; Fernandez said she particularly enjoyed the grilled zucchini bread with peaches, maple syrup and chocolate that Morse offered for dessert.

"The zucchini bread is amazing and tastes really good," she said.

Then Royal revealed her creation—a chicken stir-fry—arranged in a circular pattern with a small HCC flag in the middle.

"I tried to draw inspiration from Holyoke itself," she said, explaining that the design symbolized the Holyoke carousel. The stir-fry was surrounded by a chocolate drizzle that the judges could mix the vegetables in for a sweet and savory effect. Again, the judges noted that the chocolate was more of a garnish than an integrated ingredient.



HCC President Christina Royal selects vegetables for a stir-fry at the cookoff.

Pond then unveiled his Adobo-seasoned cheddar burger on grilled bread with kale as a garnish and a cider donut with drizzled chocolate for dessert. The judges ultimately selected Morse as the winner for the most flavorful dish and best overall use of multiple ingredients from the farmers' market.

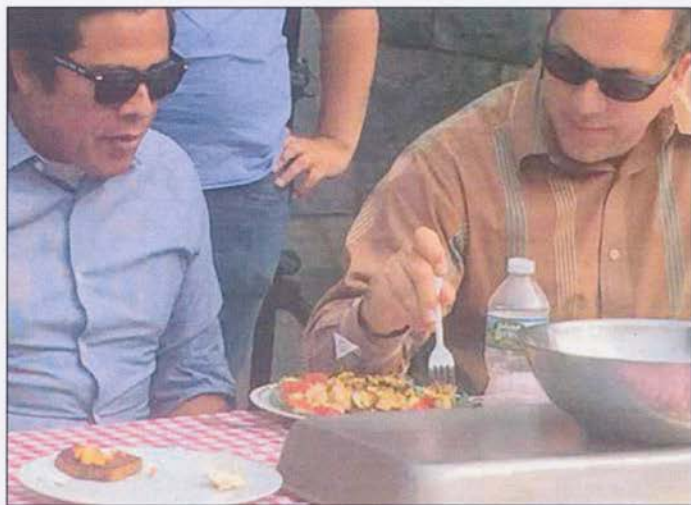
"I am really proud of all the chefs who came out today to participate and help raise awareness for the farmers' market," Villada said. "Every day, there are people in our community who wake up very early in the morning and work so hard to bring us fresh fruits and vegetables. We want to support our local farmers and let them know we have their backs."

Villada noted that more chefs are buying local ingredients for their restaurants at the market and hopes to see that increase; publicity such as the cook-off helps draw attention to the market, he said.

"I am very happy with the turnout today," Villada said. "It's great to see our community coming out to support our farmers. I think it's a humbling experience for all of us to meet the farmers who grow the food we eat every day."



School Superintendent Stephen Zrike and Holyoke Fire Chief John Pond work on their culinary creations.



Judges Neftali Duran and Aaron Vega sample a dish in the competition.