

Big Fish tackles dessert for Big Finale

Big Brothers/Big Sisters to benefit from sweet fest

By Denise M. Baran-Unland
FOR THE HERALD NEWS

John Mathias is hoping his foray into dessert creation — a custom-designed gingerbread crumble — will be a winner at Big Finale. The annual fundraiser to benefit Big Brothers Big Sisters of Will and Grundy Counties will feature two hours of dessert samplings from nearly a dozen area chefs.

“We’ll serve the crumble with pumpkin bourbon cream, present it in wine or champagne glasses and garnish it with mint or candied ginger,” said Mathias, owner of the Big Fish Bar & Grille in Wilmington. “We don’t make this in our establishment, although we now may run it a couple of times. The trick was to prepare something really good that could easily serve 300 people.

If you go

What: Big Finale

When: 3:30-5:30 p.m. Oct. 11

Where: Joliet Country Club, 1009 Spencer Road, Joliet

What: Two hours of dessert samplings, music and auctions

Tickets: \$50 each. Reserve by Oct. 6

For more information: Call 815-723-2227 or visit www.bbbswillgrundy.org

When contemplating desserts for the Oct. 11 event, Mathias decided against his restaurant signature specialties, such as the bread pudding with bourbon cream or the chocolate chip cookie pie with whipped cream and caramel, both unsuited for bite-sized servings.

Instead, Mathias considered possibilities that suggested the fall season: a sweet potato mouse or a

dessert that featured the flavor of pumpkin. “We wanted to give the people there a show,” he said.

And a show they will get.

“This is not going to be an afternoon to be dieting, let me tell you,” said Fiona Alston, a Big Finale coordinator. “This is a fun way for the chefs to compete with each other and for the community to meet the different chefs while they raise money to help the children.”

Big mission

Through a variety of mentoring programs, Big Brothers Big Sisters helps high-risk youth, primarily those from single parent homes, to reach their fullest potential.

It’s this mission, Alston said, that makes the Big Finale a well-attended event by the community and chefs alike.

From the moment Mathias was asked to participate in the Big Finale, he wanted to be involved.

“I myself was never involved with



LIZ WILKINSON ALLEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Sous chef Jason Peck holds Big Fish Bar & Grille’s gingerbread crumble with pumpkin bourbon cream that will be one of the desserts featured at the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Will and Grundy Counties Big Finale fundraising event.

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Big Brothers/Big Sisters. But when I was growing up, I had mentors in the restaurant business, and I know what the difference that can make, especially to a teenager.” Mathias said.

Guided by those mentors, Mathias’ restaurant career began as a dishwasher and busboy, then progressed to sous chef and kitchen manager. He worked for large corporations and small “ma and pa” establishments.

Eventually, Mathias decided that managing a full-service restaurant was where he wanted to be, and he opened Big Fish Bar & Grille on New Year’s Eve.

“I know that is supposed to be taboo, but we did

it anyway,” Mathias said.

“You don’t work in the restaurant business for money. You do it because you love what you do, because you have a passion for it and the instant gratification of a job well done. I love talking to the people on the floor and throwing a party for them every night,” he added.

Big Fish Bar & Grille’s goal is to serve the freshest fish and seafood the market offers. Menu items include gumbo, jambalaya, Maryland crab cakes, as well as chops and steaks. The dessert menu constantly changes.

“We have a triple fudge cake that we serve warm,” Mathias said. “And sometimes we decide to try something with Key lime.”

Big Fish Bar & Grille is located at 27425 S. Will Road (on the Des Plaines River at Harborside Marina), Wilmington. For more information call 815-476-9331. For more information about Big Brothers Big Sisters of Will and Grundy Counties,