

## Gwinnett 'MasterChef Junior' contestant competing in tonight's season finale

By Isabel Hughes



Creekland Middle School student Quani Fields will appear on the Season 6 finale of "MasterChef Junior" tonight at 8 p.m. (Special Photo)

Squid ink, flour and eggs.

Standing under the bright lights of Chef Gordon Ramsay's kitchen, then-11-year-old Quani Fields made a mental list of the ingredients he needed for squid ink pasta and what he could do with it in the 45 minutes he was allotted.

As he looked around at his fellow "MasterChef Junior" contestants, Fields smiled, thinking back to the spaghetti dinner he'd made not too long before for his soccer team.

Confident in his cooking abilities, the Lawrenceville chef got to work, reminding himself of what he'd first learned at the Atlanta Midtown Young Chefs Academy.

“They taught me a lot,” Fields said. “They taught me different techniques and the basics of cooking, but they also taught me how to make homemade pasta, which was the dish that got me to the finale. The squid ink pasta was probably my favorite dish.”

Tonight at 8 p.m., Fields, who is now 13, will once again appear on FOX’s “MasterChef Junior,” a cooking competition show hosted by Ramsay that begins with 40 contestants between the ages of 8 and 13.

Each week, the field is pared down as the young chefs compete against each other, culminating in tonight’s finale, which, for the first time, will feature three finalists — two girls and Fields — instead of the typical two.

Thanks to his pasta dish in the penultimate round, Fields claimed the first finale spot, followed by Chicago’s Beni Cwiakala and Texas’ Avery Meadows.

And though he made reaching the Season 6 finale look easy, Fields wasn’t always No. 1.

“In the beginning, it was hard because I was in the bottom,” he said. “After a (few rounds) though, I got the hang of it and got more confident and knew I could do it. It was really cool and really stressful, but I met a bunch of new people who liked cooking as well and made new friends, so it was fun.”

Fields, a student at Creekland Middle School, first discovered his love for cooking around age nine when watching his mother and grandmother in the kitchen.

“In the beginning, it was just fun to have him in kitchen with me,” Rebecca Pointer, Fields’ mom, said. “It was also interesting to have him doing something other than playing soccer.”

Though soccer still took up much of Fields’ time — to this day, the teen is still an avid soccer player — the more he cooked, the more he enjoyed it, which led him to Midtown’s Young Chefs Academy.

The academy, which was founded in April 2003 as a first-of-its-kind franchise concept by Julie Burleson, offers cooking classes to children who are both intent on pursuing a career in the culinary field and those who just want to try their hand at cooking.

It “meets students at any level,” Burleson said, and offers everything from birthday parties to advanced classes for “more serious members who really want to work on their skills.”

“It’s so impressive and so exciting to see not only the students in general and what they create, but students like Quani who make it to a (national show) and have a chance at the coveted Master Chef title,” Burleson said. “We’re excited to be a part of Quani being inspired and continuing to cook.”

Though Ramsay, who is known for his rants and for challenging chefs, and the time constraints contestants have to create their dishes, made the competition stressful, Fields said the “MasterChef Junior” experience didn’t squash his love for cooking; in fact, he said, it taught him quite a bit.

“(The show) was like cooking in your own kitchen but a lot harder because of all the lights and all the pressure,” Fields said. “But it (taught me) how to get the timing down with everything I cook, and now I treat stuff like I only have an hour to make it. I also learned what flavors go good together and what don’t, and how important (presentation) is.”

Pointer said the competition also taught her son the importance of perseverance.

“As he’s grown throughout the show, I’ve learned a lot about him what I’m most proud of is probably his composure and his ability to take in constructive criticism and not let it break him down,” she said. “I work with a lot of adults who can’t (take criticism,) so seeing those qualities in him makes me really proud of who he is as a person.”

Nonchalantly, Fields offered some advice to potential contestants: “stay calm, it makes it a lot easier.”

“Also, make sure you don’t just put you in the judges food, but (cook) what you know the judges like,” he added.

While it won’t be known until tonight who wins the competition and walks away with \$100,000 and the “MasterChef Junior” title, Fields said at the end of the day, it comes down to doing the best job as a chef.

“My favorite thing about cooking is just putting the plate together,” he said. “It’s about seeing what you’ve made.”

Pointer echoed her son.

“I’m just really looking forward to watching him again in his zone and seeing the composure he has when trying to put together a dish while competing against two other cooks,” she said. “I know he will go with the flow and put the best that he can on the plate.”

The two-hour season finale will air on FOX5 Atlanta at 8 p.m. tonight and includes a three-course meal: an appetizer, an entree and a dessert.

More information about the show and Season 6 can be found at [fox.com/masterchef-junior](http://fox.com/masterchef-junior).