



# American Culinary Federation Chef of the Year 2026 Regional Qualifier Guidelines

Updated July 19, 2025

American Culinary Federation, Inc. • Attention: Administration • 6816 Southpoint Pkwy, Ste 400 • Jacksonville, FL 32216 • (800) 624-9458 • [www.acfchefs.org](http://www.acfchefs.org)

## Preparing for the Competition:

All Chefs selected to compete at the 2026 Regional Qualifier will follow the following guidelines:

<b>COY</b>	<p>Individual W Category: Practical and Contemporary Hot Food Cooking</p> <p>Two (2) Course Gastronomique Meal for Four (4) to include:</p> <p>Three (3) varieties of Hors d' oeuvres, four (4) of each, served on a tray for "Butler style" service.</p> <p>Four (4) portions of a warm main course, presented on a Restaurant Platter served with appropriate accompaniments and sauces for "Russian style" service.</p> <p>Protein Sponsor Protein; one (1) portion to be plated for critique</p>	<p>Judges will serve themselves from the restaurant platters</p>
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## Practical and Contemporary Hot Food Cooking, Individual W Category

### General Guidelines:

Competitors will design a Gastronomique menu which must include seven (7) required ingredients (see list of required ingredients below).

- Starter Course for passing: Must include one (1) variety of each type:
  - Lacto-Ovo Vegetarian
  - Vegan
  - Pescetarian in design
  - Must include an ingredient from the basket for each type of Cold Hors d' oeuvres.
  - This course must include one (1) hot and one (1) cold hors d' oeuvres and the third (3rd) may be either hot or cold (chef's choice).
  - Individual portions are not to exceed 35grams.
  - Hors d' oeuvres (12 pieces) are to be served on tray "Butler style".
- Entree: Required proteins include "TBD by sponsor".
- Competitors are required to prepare (5) portions of each course, four (4) to be served on a platter for judges' tasting and one (1) is to be plated for display/critique and to guide the judges on how the chef wants the course plated from the platter.
- The main course platter should be warm and have appropriate accompaniments, garnishes, and sauces.
- Sauce(s) may be served in a separate bowl.
- One (1) element of the entree may be served in a separate dish, such as a casserole/cassoulet dish.
- Competitors have ten (10) minutes for set-up, seventy-five (75) minutes to cook, ten (10) minutes for plating and fifteen (15) minutes for clean-up.
- Competitors are required to submit a HACCP report for all food items he/ she brings into the competition kitchen (consisting of temperature logs while food is in production and transport); this will be provided to the judges upon entering the kitchen at the stated competition start time.
- Competitors must provide five (5) judges packets. These must be presented to the judges in packet form (simple stacked pages with one (1) staple) upon entering the kitchen at the stated competition start time.



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The packets for the judges should be easy to follow and include:

- A menu written as it would be presented to the guest.
- A color, close-up photo of both dishes (should be current and representative of what the judges will receive).
- Followed by the recipe including ingredients, quantities, and procedures.
- The packet should be produced with standard formatting of Times New Roman 12pt font and include only a staple at the upper left-hand corner of the packet—no binders, covers or anything to inhibit easy access and reference for the judge.
- Packets are to be provided to judges on-site on the day of the competition.

## **Ingredient Guidelines:**

- Recipe ingredients are allowed to be pre-scaled and measured; however, no pre-mixing is allowed. Competitors should bring enough of each ingredient to satisfy the recipes; excess product and waste should be limited.
- No advance preparation or cooking is allowed.
- Cleaned and peeled mirepoix ingredients are acceptable. Chopped herbs, shallots and garlic are also acceptable.
- Vegetables and fruits can be peeled, and salads may be cleaned and washed, but not cut or shaped in any way; beans may be pre-soaked.
- Salads may be cleaned and washed, and beans may be pre-soaked.
- No finished soups or sauces are allowed. However, basic stocks may be brought in. No clarified consommés are allowed. Stocks should be unaltered; reduced or fortified stocks are not allowed.
- The following ready-made dough may be brought in: brick (brick), puff pastry and filo (phyllo) dough.
- All combinations of ingredients must be completed during the allotted production/plating window.
- All meat proteins can be brought in fabricated, cleaned, trimmed, and ready to cook.
- Proteins can be brought in marinated / brined, and the competitor does not have to show the process of butchery or marinating / brining of the product.
- The competitor may bring in the elements of the forcemeat pre-ground i.e. the lean, the fat, etc. but must combine the forcemeat in their production window."
- Proteins intended for stuffing can be brought in fabricated to the point where they can be stuffed.
- Competitors must bring their own food items and ingredients.

## **Competition Kitchen:**

- A kitchen diagram and a list of equipment provided will be sent to each competitor by the ACF national office once the kitchen design has been established. This will include the refrigeration and freezer space available and the number of electrical outlets.
- Competitors must bring their own tools, cookware, small specialty equipment, and chinaware.
- Please keep in mind that you will be limited to the number of outlets provided and the use of power strips will be at the discretion of the lead judge.
- Time will not be adjusted for equipment malfunctions that result from the provided wattage being overrun. Competitors should choose equipment that can be supported by the number of outlets and wattage provided.



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- The amount of space available is limited so only bring in the appropriate amount of equipment.

## Timeline and Guidance:

Window	Timing	Guidance
Set Up Window	10 Minutes	Chefs can move into their stations and set up for effective execution; no cooking may occur in this window. However, water may be set to heat, immersion circulators can be turned on, and products may be unwrapped for initial preparations.
Production Window	75 Minutes	All production leading to service of the menu must be executed within this window, including all technical skills, knife cuts, cooking and fabrication.
Service Window	10 Minutes	Chefs can begin service immediately as this window opens and service must be completed within the allotted time. A competitor's food delivered outside the service window is subject to a point deduction. If the competitor's food delivery impedes the next competitor's service window, judging priority will go to the on-time competitor.
Clean up Window	15 Minutes	Chefs are to leave at the conclusion of this window with the kitchen in the same condition as it was when they entered their set-up window. All remaining food items should be displayed and labeled for judging.

## Uniform:

Competitors must wear the following:

- Chef coat
- Black pants
- Kitchen appropriate black shoes or clogs
- Competition toque
- Full apron

## Judging Process:

- Competitors will be evaluated by a panel of distinguished chefs who will serve as kitchen judges and tasting judges.
- After the "set-up window" time is complete, competitors will not be allowed to leave the competition kitchen. All dishes and equipment will need to remain in the kitchen until after the cooking window is closed. Any infractions of this rule will result in loss of points or disqualification at the discretion of the judges. In the event a competitor requires additional product or equipment they will need to make a request to the floor judge.
- The lead judge will have the discretionary right to clear a viewing area with the intention of maintaining the integrity of the overall competition.
- All the judge's decisions are final.

\*\*\*not including sponsor protein



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## **Market Baskets:**

### ***Northeast Regional:***

Walleye fish  
Red Swiss Char  
Golden Fingerling Potatoes  
Spring Peas  
Asparagus  
Golden Delicious Apple  
Spring type Wheat beer, Chefs' choice of brewer  
and varietal.

### ***South Regional:***

Red Snapper  
Chayote  
Beets  
Artichokes  
Rhubarb  
Carolina Gold Rice  
Bourbon, chefs' choice of distiller and varietal

### ***Central Regional:***

Pickeral or Pike  
Baby Marrow (squash)  
Cauliflower  
Radishes  
Sweet Potato  
Kumquats  
Irish Whiskey

### ***Western Regional:***

Lake Trout  
Sugar snap Peas  
Avocado  
Lacinato Kale  
Rutabaga  
Cherries  
Unoaked Chardonnay, chef's choice