

Celebrity chef congratulates Columbus with a classy lunch

By ANDREW WIND, Courier Staff Writer

WATERLOO --- Spaghetti and meatballs were on the menu Friday at Columbus High School, served with a generous helping of celebrity.

Celebrity chef Rocco DiSpirito was on the line dishing up platefuls of his mom's special recipe along with garlic toast and lettuce salad. DiSpirito has written several cookbooks and starred on "The Restaurant," an NBC reality show that aired in 2003 and 2004.

His appearance was on behalf of the Del Monte/Do Something National Canned Food Drive Challenge, in which Columbus competed with 95 other schools and won.

Columbus collected 210,621 cans in the contest between Nov. 1 and Dec. 15. That effort included 95 percent of the school's 317 students, meaning each participant collected an average of 702 cans.

The celebrity's "mama," Nicolina DiSpirito, arrived at Columbus Thursday afternoon and spent about three hours making the sauce and 1,000 meatballs out of 90 pounds of hamburger. She was assisted by a crew of about 10 teachers, kitchen workers and parents throughout the afternoon.

"It was really wonderful to see all these beautiful people here," said Nicolina DiSpirito, a former school lunch worker who speaks with an Italian accent. "They treat me like their own."

Rocco DiSpirito arrived at the school about an hour before the meal to help with final preparations. This is his second year hosting the national canned food drive. After loading trays of garlic toast onto a cart in the school's kitchen, he marveled at what "one little school in Waterloo, Iowa" had accomplished.

"A little school in the middle of the country can do extraordinary things," he said. The day spent at the winning school is the culmination of the food drive and "probably the greatest part of this for me."

Based on the average number of cans per student, Columbus edged out second- and third-place finishers Benedictine Military School in Savannah, Ga., with 152,000 cans and San Mateo (Calif.) High School with 300,000 cans. The drive brought in 1.63 million cans nationally, which were donated to America's Second Harvest along with food banks, homeless shelters and other nonprofit organizations in each school's community.

Columbus' cans were donated to the Cedar Valley St. Vincent de Paul Center. In addition, Del Monte donated \$35,000 worth of canned food to St. Vincent de Paul on Friday.

"I congratulate you for being very innovative," DiSpirito told the students before serving the meal in the gymnasium. He noted two of the ways students were encouraged to bring in cans: as payment to wear something other than their uniform to school, and as admission for a dance.

Columbus was aiming to collect 75,000 cans for the contest, said sophomore Libby Craig.

"When they first told us about it, I thought the goal was unreachable," she said. "It kind of seemed like a lot for a school of our size."

"I think it's cool that they're going through all the effort to bring us a meal," said senior Holly Gaard.

"Things like this don't happen to us very often," added senior Ashley Rogers. "When they do, it gets kind of exciting."

The media hype surrounding DiSpirito's visit was part of that excitement. A reporter and camera crew were there from Channel One, which does daily newscasts for schools across the country.

"We watch Channel One every day in our classroom," said Craig.

Students also appreciated the food.

"It's good," said senior Kenny Bullis. "It's a lot better than school lunch.

"It's the best spaghetti I've had. I usually burn mine."



DiSpirito hugs his mama after introducing her to Columbus students, who give her a standing ovation.

BRANDON POLLOCK / Courier Photo Editor



Rocco DiSpirito serves up spaghetti.

BRANDON POLLOCK / Courier Photo Editor



Rocco and his mama, Nicolina DiSpirito, check the progress of the pasta.
BRANDON POLLOCK / Courier Photo Editor



Celebrity chef Rocco DiSpirito transfers spaghetti to serving pans Friday in the Columbus High School kitchen. Columbus was the winner among 96 schools nationwide that participated in the Del Monte/Do Something Canned Food Drive Challenge.