

## Chef of the Year honored for more than cooking

January 27, 2010

By Mark Taylor Post-Tribune correspondent

When the Chefs of Northwest Indiana Chapter of the American Culinary Federation (ACF) voted Cheryl Molenda as the organization's "Chef of the Year," it wasn't for her cooking, though she is an accomplished chef.

Molenda, 55, is a married mother of three who lives in Dyer, works as a customer service representative for ArcelorMittal Steel in East Chicago and cooks for events at the Inn of the Aberdeen in Valparaiso.

She doesn't have her own restaurant, catering company or country club cooking job as many of the ACF chapter members do.

Her award is in recognition for the service she performs. The "Chef of the Year" plaque reads, "for outstanding service and dedication to the ACF chapter and your community."

Molenda said receiving the award was "Totally awesome. I was just so honored. My mind was going 1,000 different directions at once when my name was called," she remembered. "I was really thrilled and surprised."

The award was given at the Chefs of Northwest Indiana annual appreciation dinner at the Avalon Manor Jan. 18, where more than 100 ACF members and their families and vendors gathered for the event. There they dined upon medallions of beef wrapped in prosciutto ham served with a Madeira wine sauce and coho salmon with a fruit salsa.

Molenda's chapter peers voted her Chef of the Year the same night she was sworn in as chapter president.

"This award is for all you've done and the help you've given and participation within the chapter," she said. "It has nothing to do with the cooking, but it's all about your involvement."

Jim Galligan, executive Long Beach Country Club, said Molenda has worked many charity events, including fundraisers for Meals on Wheels, March of Dimes, the Nazareth Home and the upcoming Northwest Indiana Adult Guardianship Services dinner Jan. 28, where she leads desserts team. "Cheryl has been doing a lot for the organization," said Galligan, a Valparaiso resident. "But she can cook. Her forte is desserts. I eat them at every event we work together and they are terrific."

Jack Mix, executive chef at Comfort's Catering in St. John, said Molenda works hard for the organization and the many charitable events it sponsors. "And she does much of this on her own, with no restaurant or company backing her."

So, while she wasn't named Chef of the Year for her cooking skills, other accomplished area chefs consider Chef Molenda a talented peer, along with her "test kitchen army of 30 co-workers who line up to sample my desserts," she chuckled.