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James Beard semifinalist caught off-guard

Chef Girouard doesn't know who nominated him for award

Amanda McElfresh
amcelfresh@theadvertiser.com

Justin Girouard still isn't sure how he ended up as one of 20 semifinalists for the Best Chef: South award from the James Beard Foundation.

Anyone can submit a chef or restaurant for consideration in the fall, according to the foundation's official rules. Girouard has checked around. It wasn't anybody at his downtown Lafayette restaurant, The French Press. It wasn't anyone in his family or anybody he knows personally, at least as far as he knows.

But there's no doubt about the

outcome. Girouard, 31, is officially a candidate for the highest award that can be presented to a chef in North America.

It was the last position Girouard expected to be in about 10 years ago, when he was working as a dishwasher at Stella, a popular New Orleans eatery. He slowly worked his way up the ladder, learning more about cooking and realizing he had a knack for it.

"I always enjoyed cooking, but I never thought of it as a professional career path. It sort of found me," Girouard said.

He worked off and on at Stella, being promoted to higher kitchen positions, and eventually

took time off to travel to France to study there. Those two months marked a turning point.

"I was working in an actual kitchen and it really happened at the right time, because my technical ability had reached a point where I felt I could keep up with the dishes," he said. "I could get close enough to keep trying it again and again until I perfected it."

All the while, Girouard kept in mind the Cajun influences of his family, as well as that of his Italian grandmother, whose spaghetti recipe proved to be one of the hardest to perfect.

Two years ago, Girouard decided to open The French Press with his wife, Margaret, and have created a reputation for preparing traditional items like



Chef Justin Girouard, owner of The French Press in downtown Lafayette, has been nominated for a James Beard Award, the highest award that can be given to a chef in North America. Girouard is seen Wednesday at his restaurant. LESLIE WESTBROOK, LWESTBROOK@THEADVERTISER.COM

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Learning the science of rock-climbing



Bond set for mom in Sunset