

Oct. 20, 1999----

COLUMBUS, Ohio --The challenge was daunting, like staring deep into the Caribbean Sea from atop Mount Hillaby in Barbados.

I felt squeamish.

I was facing a bowl of White Castle Spicy Cheeseburger Soup.

Go for it?

I had to. I was a judge in the 8th Annual White Castle Recipe Contest recently held at White Castle headquarters in Columbus.

Soup made from sliders may sound unappealing, but Chicago native Carol Miller's thick broth, including 10 White Castle hamburgers, two cups of peeled potatoes, a jalapeno pepper and a garlic clove, won the contest.

Her soup beat out a funky field that included Castle Rellenos, barbecue meatballs, a spinach meat roll and Castle cobbler.

More than 390 contestants from 25 states entered the competition. Miller's Farmhouse Barbecue Muffins even took second place.

She has too much time on her hands.

The nine finalists were judged on best use of a hamburger, originality and taste. The 10th finalist - Mr. Owen's White Castle Leek Pie - never made it out of the White Castle cafeteria test kitchen. The concoction created by David Owen of Louisville, Ky., includes 10 sliders, 10 chopped pickles, six eggs, two pounds of leeks and a cup of Watling's Ale. His pie crust is made of White Castle hamburger buns. It takes time to work these things out.

Miller's muffins were so good that several judges told judge Marci Ingram they should be introduced on the real White Castle breakfast menu. Ingram is married to Bill Ingram, chairman of the board and president of White Castle System Inc. We judges knew what side of our bread was buttered.

And should White Castle take us up on our suggestion, I even have a name: the Lickety-Split Biscuit.

"I'm not sure what makes the muffin work," said Miller, 68, from her home on a former dairy farm in Northumberland, N.Y. "A little bit of cider vinegar helps. There's a half a teaspoon of chili powder. It's that combination. With the chili powder and cider vinegar, the brown sugar cuts it a bit."

Miller's secrets can be traced to the cuisine of Barbados in the West Indies, where her husband, Bob, worked in international lumber shipping. Barbados chefs are renowned for their piquant approach in preparing flying-fish and meats. Miller is collaborating with Albany, N.Y., chef Louise Fisher on the upcoming cookbook "The Bounty of Barbados."

Miller hasn't had a restaurant-bought White Castle in years. There are no restaurants near her upstate New York home. She purchases her sliders in her local grocery store's frozen food section.

Born and reared in Chicago, Miller will never forget the last time she had a restaurant slider. "It was the day my husband and I were married," she reminisced. "March 7, 1957. The bride and groom rarely get to eat much at all, they're so busy. We were going to O'Hare and there was a White Castle near where we got married at the First Presbyterian Church in Evanston. So we stopped there, got a sack of hamburgers and went on to the airport."

Miller also won the contest in 1996 for White Castle chili tamale casserole (ouch). The winner gets 520 White Castle burgers, a sack of 10 a week for a year.

"I have all these White Castle coupons for 500 hamburgers," said Miller, who has submitted 40 recipes to White Castle over the years. "I can't do anything with them!"