

Food for the soul

Artistry of food carving on display in Rockville



CONTESSA CRISOSTOMO/THE GAZETTE

Culinary artist Yung Cohn holds a watermelon she carved for the "From Farm to Market" art exhibit at Rockville's Metropolitan Center for the Visual Arts.

BY CONTESSA CRISOSTOMO
STAFF WRITER

Yung Cohn sat in the kitchen of her Gaithersburg home Saturday morning and turned three melons into flowers.

With a small pointed knife in her right hand and a honeydew melon in her left, Cohn carved petals into the bald fruit.

"This one's my favorite because of the jade color," she said.

Cohn is a professional culinary carving artist who has trained with professional carvers all over the country, including Food Network Challenge winner James Parker of Virginia.

Just last year she began training to carve professionally and for the last month she has carved watermelon sculptures that are on display in the "From Farm to Market" exhibit at Rockville's Metropolitan Center for the Visual Arts, or VisArts, in Town Square.

Cohn has provided a new freshly carved watermelon each week and her latest and final sculpture is on display until the end of the show Sunday.

The exhibit showcases art pieces that demonstrate how people get their food, drawing inspiration from farms and farmer's markets, according to Harriet Lesser, VisArts director of exhibitions and programming.

"Art can be temporary or permanent," Lesser said, referring to the watermelon sculpture.

The sculpture sits among photographs and paintings of sheep grazing in a field, barns sitting on acres of farmland and people buying and selling produce at markets. There is also a life-size cow made of tin from a barn.

Lesser said Cohn's watermelon sculptures are the first real fruit pieces the gallery has ever displayed.

Cohn, 57, said she has been carving fruits and vegetables since she was a 9-year-old living in Vietnam. She would carve carrots, peppers or radishes into small designs to garnish plates to entertain her family.

"Girls are supposed to be entertaining and domestic and show that they have skills," Cohn said. "Whenever I had the chance I'd be doing garnishing."

But as she grew up, she did not have as much time to continue carving and put it aside as she completed school and got a college scholarship in the United States.

Years later, as her children grew up and she had less responsibilities, Cohn decided to take up carving again.

It was like getting back on a bike, she said.

When not working with Food Network-winning carvers, Cohn carves at least one fruit a week for practice and her own enjoyment. But Cohn does not want to be a Food Network star. She's a teacher, she said, and she wants to use her talent to teach others about the

IF YOU GO

Yung Cohn's watermelon and the rest of the "From Farm to Market" exhibit will be on display through Sunday at the Metropolitan Center for the Visual Arts (VisArts), 155 Gibbs St. in Rockville. Call 301-315-8200 or visit www.VisArtsCenter.org.

Asian art of culinary carving.

Cohn has taught fruit carving classes at D.C. Central Kitchen, a nonprofit organization that recycles surplus food and trains homeless men and women for the food service industry. She is also in discussions about teaching a fruit-carving course at Montgomery College next year.

"In particular for our event management students, it would provide a value-added skill usually only reserved for caterers," said Marcy Jackson, program director for Montgomery College's Hospitality and Transportation Safety Institute.

For Cohn, who works full-time as a systems analyst, fruit carving is more a passion than a money-maker.

"One of my friends said there's no money in this, but I don't have to worry about that," Cohn said. "Some things you do in life for the love of art and inspiration for people and the community.

"It's food for my soul," Cohn added. "It's beautiful."