

The Culinary Arts Thrive in Cobb

By Evelyn Walsh

The culinary arts are famous for long hours and high pressure, but these factors are offset by the rewards of putting beautiful meals on the table. Cobb County offers a wealth of opportunities for both professional and home chefs who aspire to prepare food that meets the same standards of excellence as the food served in the finest restaurants.

Cobb In Focus highlights three local programs that are educating Cobb County's next generation of chefs.

The Chef's Apprentice

Kennesaw State University's culinary arts apprenticeship certificate program takes a fast track approach to educating chefs, giving them the experience and contacts they need to succeed. The emphasis on hands-on, real world experience sets the program apart from many four-year culinary arts programs. In just nine months, students complete a method-based course of study (roasting, sautéing, sauce-making) on the KSU campus. They are also placed in a series of apprenticeships with some of the area's most prestigious restaurants and catering facilities.

The program has performed well despite having been established just three years ago, in the midst of the recession. "When the apprenticeship program launched, the recession was already underway," explains program manager Pamela Moss. "We took the time and place into consideration for this program, and we decided to move forward regardless of the economy. There are always people going out to dinner and they're not only going to five-star restaurants. Even in tough times, people still invest in education."

The KSU advisory board hired Chef Greg Brooks to develop and lead the program. His idea was to set Kennesaw apart from other culinary schools by requiring students to take on rotating apprenticeships at several different locations. Businesses providing apprenticeships include Villa Christina, the Four Seasons, Elevation Chop House and Endive Catering.

"The beauty of our program is that students get instruction, work on location, stand beside the chef, and what we teach them in the classroom is transferred," says Moss. "For our students, apprenticeship is not just working, it's learning. Greg's philosophy goes back to the European approach, where apprenticeship is really important. Students are working in a real kitchen, with real experience and real customers. It makes a nice bridge for students—they are exposed to and eased into a working environment."

Frazer Breckenridge, who followed Brooks as the program's chef, agrees that the apprenticeship's emphasis on work experience and placement offers students a huge advantage. "The idea is to place students into jobs—they are out working in the industry and making contacts while still in the program," he says. "When I was in culinary school, you weren't required to work and



Kennesaw State University

there were a lot of kids who graduated without contacts. This program gets your foot in the door before you are even out of school."

KSU's Success Stories

Some students come to the KSU program right out of high school, while others join the program after decades of working in a variety of fields. Primus Jones, a seafood manager at a major grocery chain, says that the program is designed to work for someone who is also managing a full-time job. For more than 10 years, Jones, who is in his late 50s, found that his passion for cooking at church events was becoming something more. It eventually grew into a catering business he christened Spiritually Fed. "One of my friends—who is a chef himself—said, 'Primus, you are already a chef. You just need the papers.'" Of all the culinary programs Jones considered, KSU was the best fit given his full-time job and stage of life. "I'm almost at retirement age, and my ambition is to

be a traveling cook—working at events and at private residences," he says. "Once you are certified, customers tend to value you more." Jones also says that the apprenticeship program offers invaluable networking opportunities. "Being with people who are in the business is great," he says. "I've learned a lot at the different locations, and it's very rewarding to talk to people. There are people I can go to with questions."

Jones is one of many success stories at Kennesaw, where several students have been offered positions by their apprenticeship sites. This spring, Barnett Spencer was invited to work at Elevation Chop House. Prior to attending KSU, Spencer had worked in a local restaurant for several years. Spencer, who is in his early 20s, began cooking when he was 15. "I was cooking, but I wanted to do more," he explains. "And now every time I go to work I learn something new. I don't work a day in my life because I love what I do."



Cook's Warehouse

Jones agrees with this assessment. “The culinary field is very rewarding because you come into contact with so many people,” he says. “Having students at different life stages makes the Kennesaw program work well.” He laughs, and adds, “You could say you get the cohesiveness that brings the dish together!”

One Stop Shopping at Cook's Warehouse

Beloved by Atlanta foodies, Cook's Warehouse provides cooking supplies and a splendid array of culinary classes. The region's largest center of avocational culinary education, the locally owned Cook's Warehouse recently celebrated its 17th year in business and, last September, opened an East Cobb location in Merchant's Walk. “Everything fell into place,” says General Manager David DiCorpo. “People wanted us here because all our other stores are in town. The renovation of Merchant's Walk made it possible.”

Classes are taught by local instructors, renowned chefs and cookbook authors, including the retailer's founder, chef and author Mary Moore. The culinary talent

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**— Pamela Moss,
Kennesaw State University**

draws food lovers in droves. “Even in a down economy, people want to cook. They nest, they entertain more,” says DiCorpo. His take on customer service is based on integrity and education. “I am happy if the customer leaves happy and armed with the information they need,” he says. “We are here to educate. A savvy customer will recognize that we

don't listen for the cash register every time they are in the store, and will come back to us because we have gained their trust.”

The cooking store's curriculum is rich and varied, and there are dozens of classes to choose from. This spring, the East Cobb location has everything from Knife Skills 101, Asian Family Favorites and The Science of Eggs to Fresh Summer Canning, Baking Basics, Bacon Lovers Night and Paella Date Night for Couples. There are also classes for children, vegans and those who prefer to cook gluten-free foods. All students receive recipes from the class menu, a taste of the dishes prepared in class and a 10 percent discount in the store on the day of the class (excluding alcohol). Private classes may also be arranged by contacting Cook's Warehouse directly.

Farm-to-Table, Yard-to-Table

Cook's Warehouse keeps abreast of culinary trends such as the farm-to-table and sustainability movements. “We are huge proponents of the farm-to-table movement,” says DiCorpo. “We also support yard-to-table! I have a 20 x 20 plot behind the class-

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room kitchen. During class, we can say 'What would this dish taste like with thyme instead of oregano?'" DiCorpo also notes that Cook's Warehouse makes every effort to showcase local vendors.

Although Cook's Warehouse is geared toward the needs of home chefs rather than professional culinary artists, it does offer opportunities for aspiring chefs to explore the world of professional cooking. "We have an assistantship program. Young people often come to us, even kids who are still in high school, and ask 'Should I do culinary?'" explains DiCorpo. "Assisting chefs lets them work alongside brilliant people. They can learn a lot, ask questions."

The Science of Cooking

The culinary arts associate of applied science degree at Chattahoochee Technical College provides Cobb residents with yet another option for culinary education. "Eleven years ago, Chef Michael Bologna founded the program—then he retired from education and handed the reins to me," explains Chef Hilary Gallagher. "It's a state school; the mission is workforce development for Georgia, in Cobb County and elsewhere."

Like KSU, Chattahoochee Tech trains chefs through a combination of classroom and work education. "The curriculum is skill-based ... knife skills, sauce and soup-making," explains Gallagher. "It's a method versus recipe-based approach. You learn the method to make rice pilaf and baked chicken wherever you go." Trends such as sustainability and farm-to-table are not part of the formal curriculum, but they are discussed in the context of method instruction. "In food as in fashion and entertainment,



you must be 'current' yet also have a firm method-based foundation," says Gallagher.

Chattahoochee students also work in an on-campus restaurant, and they are required to do an off-campus internship during the final 15 weeks of the program. "It looks like a restaurant, but it's a classroom," says Gallagher of the student-run café. "We put as much responsibility on the students as we can. There are students in the back of the house and students in the front of the house [back of the house means the kitchen, while front of the house encompasses all aspects of service and dealing directly with customers]. The café seats 45, and we have many loyal customers who come back year after year."

Gallagher says that the student body is diverse. "Many students are full-time moms or have another full-time job. We have non-traditional students; others come from four-year colleges or right out of high

school. Many are changing jobs or have been laid off." In this economy, Gallagher says, the program offers an economical alternative to four-year culinary schools. "The work is not high paying to start, so it's good that our students don't leave with \$40,000 in student loans."

A Recession-Proof Career

Gallagher believes that the culinary profession is recession-proof. "People will never stop eating," she reasons. "Also, the baby boomers are the biggest segment of the population and they are going to be in retirement homes. This work is not just about flashy jobs. Cooking for nursing homes, hospitals—these positions offer 9 to 5 jobs that work for many people's lifestyles and family commitments."

While many Chattahoochee students develop the skills to support institutions like retirement homes, the program also provides the training to excel in other aspects of the culinary arts. Graduate Eric Darin is now the executive chef at Dunwoody Country Club. Current senior Patrick Gangi, who won the state gold medal at the prestigious Skills USA competition, will go to Kansas City this June to compete in the national competition. Gangi is also the service manager at Milton's restaurant. His ability to excel in the field while holding down a demanding job proves Gallagher's point about the advantages of the Chattahoochee program for non-traditional students. "We are very proud of this program. In two years, students get a quality education and real world experience," she says. ■

HONORING GEORGIA'S STARS

Each year, the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) Foundation recognizes outstanding high school seniors and the teachers who have helped them along the way through the Student Teacher Achievement Recognition (STAR) program. The winners are chosen from a pool of nominees from across the state. A panel of judges made up of business leaders and educators pares down the list based on criteria in the areas of scholarship, leadership, citizenship and other factors. Nominated students must also submit biographical information to the panel, while the teachers submit a statement in support of his or her student. Congratulations to this year's winners, George Walton High School student Lisa Wang and her teacher Dr. Tina Link, who, along with the other fantastic nominees, were honored at the Foundation's annual banquet on April 23 at the Crowne Plaza Atlanta Ravinia Hotel. The impressive list of achievements by these students is a testament to the dedication of teachers all across the state.