'Tis the Season

Future Chefs and Diet Technicians Learn to Finesse Holiday Basics at the Thompson School

Thursday, December 12, 2013

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Culinary arts student, Garrett Blais '15 from Rollinsford, N.H., trusses a chicken.

The bird and fixings

Light cascades through a big window as steam rises from the sink. A student wearing the classic chef's hat, jacket, and checked pants busily washes up some dishes. It's like an Old Masters painting. In fact, the hat's design dates back to the 16th century. But each student has his or her own special way with the slouchy apprentice's hat. Some things never change. Of course, Julienne Guyette, aka "Chef," who teaches Culinary Nutrition at the Thompson School wears her tall, Head Chef's hat straight up.

Under Guyette's watchful eye, the five culinary arts students unwrap their chef's knives and quickly cut up vegetables for their *mirepoix*. Each one expertly turns a huge carrot to execute the dice, and then goes onto celery, onion, and perhaps a leek. Meanwhile, the ovens slowly heat up to 450 degrees. A large pot of stock simmers.

Most of these students plan to work as professional chefs. They will become the magicians behind the scenes at the best restaurants in a region that is renowned for fine food. Or, at the very least, as Alex Schutter '15, from Oxford, Mass., commented, "I'm planning to cook with my mom this holiday."

DIETETIC TECHNOLOGY STUDENT, AUDRA ST. HILAIRE '15 FROM MERRIMAC, MASS.,

ATTENDS CLOSELY AS CHEF JULIENNE GUYETTE INSTRUCTS.

Today, these students will roast a small chicken, most of them for the first time. They will also make mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, green beans, and carrots. Ideally, all dishes will finish at the same time in less than two hours. Sound familiar?

"It's the same process for a big turkey," says Guyette, "except for the time."

Moving quickly from student to student, Guyette consults on the *mirepoix*, helps to truss the small birds into neat packages, and calls out that mushrooms are available.

There is respect for each student's taste preferences from mashed potatoes with cheddar cheese to cornbread dressing. After all, this is a meal that honors family traditions.

The kitchen is now full of aroma. Random comments punctuate the silence, "Why don't we have squash? I love squash!" to "I need music!" And then there is style: one student makes his vegetables jump by jerking his sauté pan, and tools are traded like the pros do with barely a backward glance.

Guyette moves efficiently from student to student, consulting with them on their choices. Matt Ascani '15, from Marlow, N.H., is ready to make his first batch of cranberry sauce. He stirs together sugar, water, and cranberries.

"To get a gel, you'll need lemon," Guyette instructs. "The acid interacts with the sugar and the fruit to create pectin. What a wonderful color that is. You'll hear the cranberries pop when the pectin comes out."

As the roasted chickens are pulled from the ovens, and after one last taste of gravy, Christian Lang '15, from Newmarket, N.H., makes a final pronouncement: "Sweet!"

Pies

In short order, the next class of dietetic technology students arrives to bake pies. Most of them plan to work in institutional settings such as hospitals and schools rather than restaurants. But the demand for really fine food in this field has become paramount as well.

These students wear jaunty UNH baseball hats and many, but not all, are experienced bakers. Last week, each student made an all-butter pie dough and froze it. Guyette then pulled the frozen dough to let it thaw for a day or so.
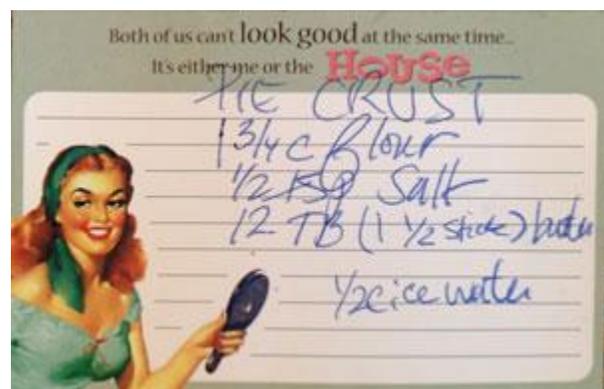
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Now students roll out their dough with lots of flour. When it's halfway to size, they flip it over to finish. Danielle Gauthier '15, from Alton, N.H., efficiently pinches the pie dough into a nice, even pattern. Although a first-year student, Gauthier has worked in many restaurants and now works at a hospital.

AUDRA ST. HILAIRE '15 WITH HER FIRST APPLE STREUSEL PIE.

In lieu of the pie weights that magazines always recommend, Guyette's students use parchment liners filled with rice and beans to weigh down the crust as it blind bakes. Meanwhile, students concoct apple, cherry, pumpkin, pecan, and chocolate cream fillings.

But not all of the students are experienced pie bakers. In this class, in less than two hours, Audra St. Hilaire '15, from Merrimac, Mass., gamely and successfully tackles making her first apple pie. No small feat.

More than a recipe

Learning to be even a good home cook is more than whipping up a couple of recipes. And so too, for these students, observing Guyette manage the kitchen, conduct her class, and plan and prep for menus is as much a part of their education as their roux skills.

When she discusses a holiday menu with colleague Jacky Goguelet, students listen closely. In his pleasant French accent, he runs down his list: "Shrimp cocktail, assorted quiches, a strudel perhaps with vegetables and sausages, maybe some palmiere with prosciutto, a fresh green salad, and for the entrée…duck, brined?"

Guyette nods, makes a few notes. "For 55?" she asks.

"Make it 65," says Goguelet. "We want to feed the back of the house as well." Guyette smiles and replies, "Of course."

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