

Culinary arts students learn skills that set them apart

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Freshly cooked steaks fill the industrial sized kitchen at Northern High School with the robust aroma of meat as students scramble to prepare the evening's menu.

It's all in a day's work for students in James Somers's culinary arts class. The culinary program began in 2011 with around ten students and now has an enrollment total of over 150.

"Look at these kids working, man," Somers said, "These kids are all up on their grades in all their classes and they are working tonight."

Students enroll in Culinary 1 as 10th-graders, Culinary 2 as 11th-graders, and Culinary 3 as 12th-graders. Students have a mere 90 minutes a day to prepare gourmet dishes for catering events off-campus.

Some students arrive early to prepare food for the bakery, which opens before classes begin. Its patrons are asked to make a donation as payment. In addition to cooking, students must complete a vocabulary exam every week as practice for their state mandated vocational exam, Somers said.

"My focus is on the kids. Once you reach Culinary 2 there is a 100 percent high school graduation rate. Of my graduates, 100 percent are engaged. Some of them go to college and some of them go to work. They all make more than minimum wage," Somers said.

Umstead Pines at Willowhaven and Mountain View Farms utilize the culinary program for events throughout the year. Students work in the kitchen at Umstead Pines every



Students take a break to show off some of the food they've spent hours prepaing during the GOP's Lincoln Douglas Event at the Durham Armory. From left to right, Cecilia Rodriguez, Tykel Joyce, Khariya Moore, Nasir Capers, Carlos Polanco and James Betts.

other Wednesday and prepare food as it is ordered.

Cecelia Rodriguez, a 12th-grade student, is continuing her culinary education next year at Johnston and Wales University in Charlotte.

"I've always loved cooking. This culinary class gave me a lot more experience," Rodriguez said.

Peter Brodsky and John Rutt also teach culinary classes with Somers. Brodsky has students prepare a rutabaga and fennel dish and says that working with rutabaga is no easy task but serves as good knife practice.

"Slicing rutabaga is like slicing softballs in to razor thin pieces. But they are also cheap," Brodsky said.

Rutt joined the program after Somers reached out to him. He said really enjoys the program because students get to work at quality events, including one in particular.

"The GOP today, that's huge," Rutt said.

The Lincoln Douglas Event, which explores the historical relationship between the GOP and black culture, was hosted by the Durham County Republican Party. The menu for the night included meatballs, roast beef with horseradish, caramel coated tomatoes, a fruit spread, a vegetable spread and rainbow sherbet punch.

Students politely ask patrons, "Would you care for a meatball?"

Immanuel Jarvis, Durham GOP

Staff Photo by Cole McCauley

Chairman, was excited to utilize the services of the culinary program.

"What better way to be able to really connect with the community by having them come," Jarvis said. "We have a set budget and they worked with us and made it happen."

The culinary program begins every year with a small grant from the school but donations throughout the year can quadruple the original investment.

"I take every penny and roll it over four or five times. If we get \$5,000 we end up spending \$20,000," Somers said.

The culinary program works to teach students the value of hard work, education, and the money that this combination provides. When students work outside of class they can receive tips for their work.

"I try and build work ethic. I show them that hard work brings you bucks, and bucks make you happy," Somers said with a smile.

The combination of the program's outstanding reputation and its network of graduates that help students find jobs and higher education opportunities is part of what makes the program so successful. The work ethic instilled by Somers, Brodsky and Rutt is recognized throughout the culinary community and has received over 150 awards in the last four years.



"I'm never leaving this table!" an excited guest tells Khariya Moore (left) at an event catered by the program.

Staff photo by Cole McCauley