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At BTC café, the food is delicious, the reservations hard to get



Culinary arts student Marshal Reed brings appetizers to fellow students Robert Porter and John Halko, who are both studying electronics engineering, during lunch at Café Culinaire at Bellingham Technical College on Friday, April 15, 2016. **Philip A. Dwyer** pdwyer@bhamherald.com

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BELLINGHAM

Standing in the kitchen of **Café Culinaire**, Morgan Bachman brushed egg wash onto the edges of a lumpia wrapper, which was filled with hoisin barbecued pork and Alaskan king crab and topped with slivers of bell pepper and Thai basil leaves.

Bachman was busy preparing for the Friday, April 15, opening of the café, which is run by the second-year students in Bellingham Technical College's culinary program. The students will graduate in June and operating the full-service restaurant — from cooking in the kitchen to waiting on diners and everything in between — will give them a taste of the industry before they dive into their careers.

“It sets you up to learn and succeed,” said Bachman, who works at [The Rhody Cafe in Bow](#). “They prepare you so much for this specific quarter of serving to the public.”

Friday marked the end of the first week [for the spring quarter menu](#) in the Northwest-themed restaurant and, in addition to the lumpia, Bachman was responsible for making smoked-duck pot stickers.

Nearby, another student was putting away beets while a rack of pork loin was being roasted and smoked in a Wood Stone vertical rotisserie.

In a few minutes, the café's doors would open for the day to diners hungry for main dishes that included lavender-spiced duck breast as well as cedar plank wild sockeye salmon with a honey-roasted peach barbecue sauce.

They had four choices for dessert, including crème brûlée made with Tony's Coffee and sugar-cinnamon churros made to be dipped into a sinful dark-chocolate sauce.

Hungry? If you haven't made reservations, you'll have to wait until next spring. Because getting into the café, which has limited seating, can be tough.

Reservations sold out in 2 1/2 hours on April 7 this year. The reservation button on Café Culinaire's website was 10 minutes late going up; in that time, the person who oversees the reservations received 12 voicemails and 47 emails about it.

The full-service restaurant, with its white tablecloths and fresh-cut flowers, is open only during spring. It has just three seatings a day during lunchtime from Wednesday through Friday mid-April to early-June. And just 25 to 35 diners are served per day.

“We wish we could accommodate more guests, but we are limited by our educational goals and class schedules,” chef-instructor Brian McDonald said.

The café has been around for 20-plus years. A total of 12 to 24 students run it, depending on the size of the class.

“This is an especially good group this year,” McDonald said.

The restaurant’s popularity also likely has something to do with how little diners pay for a delicious meal served with a critical eye on plating, temperature and timing (to make sure diners either aren’t rushed or have to wait too long between courses).

A three-course tasting menu — an appetizer, main dish and dessert — is \$18.95.

“The program budget funds food purchases, and student labor is free,” McDonald said of why prices were low, adding that labor was typically the most expensive cost in a restaurant.

Robert Porter, an Oak Harbor resident who was eyeing the maple-cured pork chop, and John Halko of Bellingham were among those able to get into the restaurant Friday. Both are electronics engineering students at BTC.

It was their first time eating there. But they’d already heard about the meals.

“We’re here because we know the food is good,” Halko said. “It always sells out.”

It wasn’t the first meal there for Bellingham residents Kendall Dodd and Rich Brown. They brought with them Brian Quijada, who was visiting from New York City, to share with him an experience they said was unique to Bellingham.

They’ve eaten here before but missed getting a reservation last year and had to wait until this spring to get back in.

“It’s like the hardest ticket to get in Bellingham,” Dodd said.

“The food is amazing,” Brown said. “We come here because the students are working so hard and learning so much, and you get to benefit from their learning.”

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