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How Do You Become A Chef?

The First Year at Culinary School

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Student chefs prepare the appetizer buffet at Café Culinaire.

How do you become a chef? Every September, 36 new students—most of college age with a sprinkling of older people—enroll in the popular Bellingham Technical College Culinary Arts Program to find out. They have come to Chef School. Over the next 21 months (seven quarters) they will work through a program unique for its physical demands, technical precision and collaborative effort. Under the professional guidance of chefs Brian McDonald, Michael Baldwin and Hilde Hettegger-Korsmo, 65 percent of their experience will be hands-on. The students acquire the skills and language of professional cooking and tour the world's cuisines in the most honest way known: by preparing and serving fine food to the public. They learn food as technique, art, and finally as a business.



Student chefs prepare the appetizer buffet at Café Culinaire.

First Quarter: The Basics

The first quarter immerses student chefs in four key courses: Introduction to the Culinary Industry, Sanitation, Culinary Skills 1, and Meat Fabrication. Training begins with the history, tools, equipment, and organization of modern professional kitchens and the causes and prevention of food-borne illnesses. The knife meets the cutting board in Culinary Skills 1 with the foundations of cooking: how to broil, grill, roast, bake, sauté, pan fry, deep fry, poach, simmer, boil, steam, braise, and stew classic meats. New words come with the preparation of stocks and sauces—mirepoix, roux, béchamel, velouté, espagnole, and hollandaise. Mastering sauces and stocks, the base of so many fine foods, is a skill that takes time. "For me, the difficulty with the sauces was seasoning," said Meredith, a first year culinary student. "Our palates are not yet up to the Chef's level!"

Many of the culinary students find meat fabrication—learning the cuts of each kind of meat and how the animal is butchered—to be the toughest part of the first quarter. To the extent that it is practical, the students reduce large pieces of meat into smaller cuts and apply their newly-acquired cooking skills to dishes that use these "fabricated" meats. Meat fabrication skills will be essential next quarter when they prepare buffets for the first time at Café Culinaire, the College's fine dining restaurant.

Second Quarter: The International Buffets



Chef Brian McDonald

After a much needed winter break, the pace picks up. Second quarter hurtles culinary students into real-life cooking situations in three classes: International and American Regional Cuisine, Culinary Skills 2, and Banqueting and Catering Management. These courses aim at a single goal: training the student chefs to prepare and serve ten extensive international buffet lunches to the public. At the buffets, presented each Friday throughout the quarter, students cook up an array of complex appetizers, vegetables and main dishes and arrange them on long tables, from which guests may serve themselves. Cuisines this year included French, Mediterranean, Italian, Chinese-Japanese, Southeast Asian-Indian, Caribbean, New England, Southern, Cajun, and Southwestern. Unlike their counterparts in European or Asian countries which have long-established cuisines, chefs in the United States must embrace a melting pot of flavors and cultures. "American chefs are uniquely required to really understand and know how to cook a variety of cultural cuisines," notes Chef Brian McDonald.

To this end, each week the culinary students start the intense study of a new cuisine. They also plunge into Culinary Skills 2, the preparation of soups, salads, vegetables, potatoes, legumes, grains, pastas, fruits, nuts, dairy products and eggs. The first few buffets, with 20-plus appetizers, vegetables, entrées and desserts, are nerve-wracking, but the class quickly settles in. It's a test of all the skills learned to date, and of teamwork. "The most rewarding thing I find is being able to immerse myself in something challenging while being a member of a team," says David Smith, a retired naval officer who is retraining to become a chef. Along with his first year classmates, he cooks and serves in a variety of stations for the buffets. The group's proficiency grows with each meal they prepare. By the tenth week, there's a feeling of nostalgia when the last buffet is over.

Third Quarter: A la Carte Lunches

Culinary students work together at the stove in the kitchen at BTC Culinary Arts. That nostalgia quickly dissipates over spring break. The students return to study nutrition, breads and pies, and most important, to serve as commis (assistant chefs) for the third quarter's primary task: ten weeks of "A la Carte" lunches at Café Culinaire. Here, the newer students serve under their more proficient second year classmates, learning to rapidly cook and plate attractive menu items. The challenge in A la Carte is to master the timing to produce complete meals, with each station in the kitchen—meat, vegetables, and starches—providing its fare hot and ready for plating at the same moment. Next year, these first year students will be the A la Carte station chefs.

In June, after 270 days, hundreds of prepared dishes, and an enormous amount of work, the first year of culinary school ends. Most of the students will spend the summer learning more at a restaurant or catering internship. In the Fall, they'll be back for second year. This is how you become a Chef.



Culinary students work together at the stove in the kitchen at BTC Culinary Arts