

NW Farms & Food

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The Mediterranean Buffet Inside the Kitchen at Chef School April 15, 2010

It's Thursday morning and the students of the Bellingham Technical College Culinary Arts Program's Café Culinaire have assembled to start this week's cooking assignment: a Mediterranean Buffet. Every Friday during winter quarter of their first year, these chef trainees will serve up a buffet for 60 diners, a challenge that tests not only their culinary skills, but their ability to work as a team.

Day 1: The Prep

Thursday morning, 8 a.m. to noon. The culinary trainees split into two groups. Twenty-two students cook in the kitchen under the direction of Chef Brian McDonald, a veteran of the Culinary Institute of America and the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, and Austrian-trained Pastry Instructor, Hilde Hettegger-Korsmo. This morning's work is dedicated to prep—chopping vegetables, and preparing stock and other ingredients that can be done ahead. Over the course of the quarter, they will have the opportunity to cook and bake at a variety of stations, testing their culinary skills at sauté, fry, broiler, soup, vegetables, salads, breads, pastries or frozen desserts.

They will also gain experience in the dining room, where this morning, eight students and Chef Korsmo have gathered to begin service planning. Today's task for the dining room students, in their roles as maitre d' (dining room manager), hosts, servers and attendants, is to set up the tables and buffet lines—down to the last detail—for tomorrow's lunch. For this week's buffet, Chef Korsmo and her group brainstorm ideas for using music, food, flowers, and decorative items brought from home to evoke a Mediterranean feeling in the dining room.



Culinary students prep vegetables for Paella and Tagine of Moroccan Spiced Salmon for the Mediterranean Buffet at Bellingham Technical College's Café Culinaire.

Day 2: Presenting the Buffet



Chef trainees prepare Stuffed Grape leaves for the buffet.

Friday, 8 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Pressure is high in the kitchen from the time the student cooks arrive. Today they will turn their prepped foods into elegant, scratch-produced dishes. The Roasted Butternut Squash Soup, Greek Salad, Whole Wheat Pitas, Paella Valenciana, Lamb Stew with Couscous, Grilled Pork Chops with Spicy Sauces, Spanish Flan, and 15 other appetizers and entrées must be hot (or chilled), attractively plated, and in the buffet line by 11:30 when the first guests begin to dine. Before that—at 10:30 a.m.—the students will break for the “family meal,” a small buffet of their own in which they sample the food. Tasting the results of their hard work is a celebration and a chance to review their efforts: Which dishes are most successful? What needs more seasoning?

The students don't have long to ponder their accomplishments. By 11 a.m., it's back to their stations to present the buffet. Chef Michael Baldwin, another Culinary Instructor, arrives to assist Chef McDonald with the student cooks in the kitchen. In the dining room, the buffet attendants pour steaming water into the trays below each serving hotel pan slot and light the burners under the covered chafing dishes. Earlier in the morning, Chef Korsmo and the service planning students reviewed the buffet lines, making sure a place was ready with the correct serving utensils for each entrée and garnish. Now they put the finishing touches on the décor, artfully placing braided garlic, eggplants and lavash flatbreads at the corners of the buffet. Someone lights the candles at each dining table and turns on music, and the soft strains of Spanish guitar fill the room.

The food arrives. Students bring out carts of steaming Mediterranean hot foods and salads, ready to place into their slots on the line. Chef McDonald surveys the appetizer line, helping cooks add the finishing touches to their dishes. It's a tempting lineup: attractive salads and starters arranged at varied heights for maximum effect.

The Pleasures of Dining

For the diner, it's a splendid way to spend the lunch hour. A host greets you by name, escorts into the dining room, and introduces you to the fellow diners at your table. Your student server—perhaps waiting tables for the first time ever—brings tea, coffee or fruit drinks. And then you go to the appetizer buffet with its arrangement of colorful salads, stuffed grapes leaves, stuffed piquillo peppers and soup—something for every palate.

Spanish Flan with Baklava

The challenge is to not take too much, because when you finish savoring these subtly flavored starters, there's an entire main course buffet awaiting you. Veal, lamb, pork, chicken, ham, and salmon entrées sit side by side with vegetable dishes like Saffron Cauliflower and Onions or Mushrooms in Garlic Sauce. By the time the dessert course arrives you won't have room to even consider it. But you must, because the elegant plates of creamy Spanish Flan and crunchy walnut and honey Baklava with the citrus sweetness of orange slices and pomegranate seeds are so out-of-this-world delicious, you'll feel you really have been transported to a Spanish villa on the Mediterranean.



Chef Brian McDonald and culinary students add the final touches to the appetizer buffet.

The Finish

Friday, 2 p.m. The last of the guests have eaten. The tables are cleared. In the kitchen, the culinary students finish the last of the clean-up. Some of them will head out to their day jobs. Some will go home for the weekend. There's a test coming up, and a paper due soon. And next week there will be a new cuisine: Italian.



Chef Korsmo discusses the buffet service with students.