

Recipe for a new life -- with a dash of hope

A cooking program teaches young inmates the art of fine cuisine. Supervisors and other officials sample their wares during an annual event for the county children's commission.

By Molly Hennessy-Fiske

May 4, 2009

In the gleaming industrial kitchen at Camp Gonzalez in Calabasas, probation youths learn culinary arts supervised by guards. They chop and slice with knives attached to wires and locked to the counter.

Before taking the class, most of these teenage cooks -- who spend their days behind a concrete wall topped with barbed wire -- could not tell a ladle from a serving spoon. Few of them had ever tasted eggplant, asparagus or artichoke hearts. Now, they are accustomed to their teacher comparing whisks and spatulas to tools.



"I tell them it's like construction: If your foreman tells you to bring a hammer, you're not going to bring him a screwdriver," said Alexis Higgins, a chef from Los Angeles Mission College who has taught about 50 probationers at the camp each of the last five years.

The key to getting teenage boys from some of the toughest areas of Los Angeles County excited about haute cuisine, she said, is to divide them into small, task-oriented groups and break down recipes into steps.

Their skills were put to the test last week when about a dozen of Higgins' best-behaved students prepared a meal of bacon-wrapped dates, chili-glazed beef sate and goat cheese-stuffed mushrooms, chocolate mousse and more for some Los Angeles County supervisors and other county officials. The ingredients were donated for the annual [children's commission](#) event.

Superior Court Judge Michael Nash, presiding judge of [Los Angeles County Juvenile Court](#), permitted the probation youths, whose names and criminal histories are confidential because of their ages, to speak about their cooking classes on the condition that their last names not be used.

Michael, a tall, serious 15-year-old from Palmdale, sliced dates in half in the camp's kitchen and [stuffed them with blue cheese](#). He wondered if they could be eaten raw but did not try. As he worked, he told stories about the strange ingredients he had discovered during class, including little precooked fishes that could be eaten whole -- anchovies.

When Michael started culinary class months ago, he thought cooking would be easy and made a lot of big mistakes. He once burned the lunchtime rice that usually feeds 60. Probationers teased him, saying that cooking was for girls.

"Sometimes you get frustrated, but you have to not give up," Michael said, adding that he hopes to find work as a cook after he is released.

Nearby, 17-year-old Dayon was chopping radishes, nervous about how the meal would be received by county officials. "I'm not sure what their impression will be," the South Los Angeles youth said. "I hope they enjoy it because we worked hard."

Learning cooking skills, Higgins said, offers a path to a better life. In January, one of her former students was accepted to Le Cordon Bleu training program at the [California School of Culinary Arts](#) in Pasadena. Cooking jobs are plentiful and well-paid, she said -- the challenge for her students lies in applying themselves.

They are the kind of teenagers, she said, who are so unaccustomed to eating at a table that she has to tell them not to hold their plates in their hands during field trips to restaurants.

At their catered event Thursday on a patio atop the Los Angeles County building, the student cooks were disappointed at first. They painstakingly laid the buffet table only to see supervisors sail by without stopping. More pesto tortes lay waiting in the kitchen downstairs. "It turned out good, but they're not eating it," Michael said, frowning.

Higgins prodded the youths -- who wore crisp white smocks labeled "New Chef" -- to offer napkins and water, even if they could not distinguish between sparkling and Pellegrino. Finally, as the program got underway, the swelling crowd began to eat.

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who is staying away from sweets and carbohydrates, was among the first to sample the spicy hummus. An aide to Supervisor Don Knabe snapped up a few dates.

By the end, commissioners had loaded their plates with mini-chocolate mousses and chocolate-covered strawberries. Even the guitarist ate some [stuffed mushrooms](#).

As probation officers prepared to escort the cooks back to Calabasas, Dayon pointed to his half-empty tray of dates.

"Everybody's eating," he said, "so I think we did all right."

molly.hennessy-fiske

@latimes.com