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Frederick County students get a taste of culinary arts at program kickoff event

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star
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This display at Blue Ridge Community and Technical College's culinary program shows different ways to slice and dice food. Starting in the 2024-25 school year, students from Frederick County Public Schools will be able to enroll in the program.

MOLLY WILLIAMS/The Winchester Star

MARTINSBURG, W.Va. — Six Frederick County Public Schools students and their families gathered for a gourmet meal Tuesday evening in celebration of the beginning of their own culinary journeys.

They dined on Chicken Milanese, scalloped potatoes, sauteed peas with mint and saffron sauce, a green salad and an array of confectionery delights.

Everything they ate was something that either was or has been made by students enrolled in Blue Ridge Community and Technical College's Culinary JumpStart Program, a dual enrollment opportunity that allows students from participating high schools to start pursuing culinary degrees before receiving their diplomas.

The FCPS students in attendance Tuesday will soon be doing just that.

"The most exciting aspect of this program is this is the tip of the iceberg," said FCPS Superintendent George Hummer. "This is a starting point. So we are very, very thankful for the partnership and the relationship that we are building so that we can continue to expand."

The Frederick County School Board gave this partnership the green light at its February meeting, setting the wheels in motion for a culinary arts pathway through the division's Dowell J. Howard Center that will welcome its first cohort next school year.

The six students present Tuesday evening will make up at least part of that group. They filled out the necessary forms on site and officially became dual enrollment students at Blue Ridge, located in Martinsburg, West Virginia.

Next year, they'll be bused to Blue Ridge from Dowell J five days a week for culinary classes from 8:45 a.m. to 10:45 a.m. They'll earn 27 college credits at no cost to them, putting them about halfway through their associate degrees.

Then, if they continue their culinary pursuits, they'll be workforce ready within a year of high school graduation.

"Our graduates can go and work in any kitchen, but it's really designed for that ... culinary experience kitchen, sous chef to head chef," said Leslie See, vice president of enrollment management at Blue Ridge. "So this program will introduce them to that."

Blue Ridge chef instructors gave students insights into what the program will entail. Miriam Conroy, department chair of Blue Ridge's Academy of Hospitality and Culinary Arts, told them that they'll explore cuisines from every continent "including Antarctica."

“It took me years to get them to tell me what their favorite food was,” she said, referencing the scientists who work there. “Turns out, it’s pizza.”

Steve Weiss, associate dean of hospitality and culinary arts at Blue Ridge, said that he could turn the students into artists, even if they didn’t believe it. A pastry chef at heart, Weiss said he teaches students about different desserts and cake styles, as well as chocolate and sugar sculpting work, some of which is on display in one of the school’s hallways.

“So there’s Eiffel Towers, there’s chefs and waiters, there’s boxes made out of sugar that are very ornate that look like they’re made out of Capodimonte (a type of porcelain),” he said. “... My pleasure is, if a student comes to me and says ‘I’m not artistic’ or ‘I can’t ever do anything like this,’ to prove them wrong when they step into my program. And I show them, step by step, how to be successful.”

Notably, Weiss has appeared on Netflix’s “Is It Cake?” and Food Network’s “Halloween Wars,” both of which require high-level artistry with food, particularly desserts. In other words, he’s quite the expert teacher.

And while being in the kitchen can be great fun, the chefs also spoke to the realities of the food industry. It’s long hours on your feet and sacrificing traditional weekends. It’s a fast-paced environment with high expectations. It does, they said, require passion to be in the business.

“But it’s a very rewarding profession,” Weiss said. “It’s a very honorable profession. You’re creating food that someone else will eat that will keep them alive and keep them going. You know, it’s an honorable thing to do.”

This career, Conroy said, can take students anywhere and everywhere. They could become professional teachers or airline chefs. They could go to Antarctica and feed scientists or find a niche in any institution that appeals to them.

She also noted that there’s been a big push to pay restaurant workers a livable wage since the pandemic, giving employees in restaurants “a lot more leverage than they used to have.”

And if students in the program realize that the culinary industry isn’t for them, that’s also a valuable outcome, as it still helps to clear the way for wherever they might be headed.

Plus, no matter where these students wind up, it won’t hurt them to know how to cook.

“It’s a life skill,” Weiss said. “So the last thing you want to do when you’re in college is eat ramen and grilled cheese all the time. So if you can learn a life skill while you’re at it, I mean, this is a great thing.”

Dalton Long, a future culinary JumpStart student from FCPS, said that he’s always liked cooking and grew up helping his dad in the kitchen. So when the opportunity to check out this program came his way, he eagerly pursued it.

While he’s not sure where his path will take him, he said he’s glad to have the opportunity to explore culinary arts.

“I’m a bit nervous, but I’m also excited,” he said. “I’m just kind of waiting for the school year to start now. ... And I normally never say that. I’m always, like, ready for the summer. But I’m ready to get started now. I’m ready to learn.”

For more information about JumpStart at Blue Ridge, visit

<https://www.blueridgectc.edu/audience/new-student/high-school-student/>.

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