

Hi, and welcome to Line to Learning, a program where we explore education opportunities, here in Santa Barbara. I'm Debbie Davidson. Today we are going to be learning more about the culinary arts school at Santa Barbara City College. Joining us today is department head, Chef Randy Bublitz.

Thank you for joining us today, Randy.

Thank you for having me on the show.

You have such a wonderful reputation throughout our community for your work at Santa Barbara City College. What can a student expect if they sign up for your classes?

Well, again, four semesters, four years worth of hands-on education in the kitchen. We have a number of professional chefs who are faculty and part-time faculty. So, they get a lot of experiences from a lot of different people. It's the hands-on constant slicing and dicing that develops their skills, so when they leave here they will be able to get a job and work efficiently in a kitchen.

So, actually after only the two years, somebody could go from high school or decide to change his or her career, have two years training, and actually be ready for a job.

Oh yes. The field is pretty open and it is still that traditional apprenticeship-type of program. But, cooking or cooking school gives you that opening or foot in the door kind of thing. And, it gives you the experience that says to the employer he or she is not hiring someone fresh. They recognize that you will most definitely know how to use a knife, how to cook, and how to move in a kitchen, which is very important.

So, what you said, get your foot in the door. We know you have a great reputation here in the Santa Barbara community. What is the reputation like throughout the industry? If somebody came to a restaurant, say in Napa or Chicago, and said they had this training, do you think they would be given serious consideration?

Oh yes. I think Santa Barbara City College has an excellent reputation throughout the state, and in certain academic areas, throughout the nation. I'm not sure how many restaurants in the Chicago would know of us, but I think there's a few in Napa. We've had students who worked up there. I've had students who've worked in Las Vegas and Florida and places like that. There's an unconfirmed report of a student who has gone to France and was in Paris and wanted to take an advanced class at the Cordon Bleu. They were telling them, (said in a bad French accent) "no, cuz you don't have the experience." But, then he mentioned where he went to school while one of the executive chefs was going by and said, "oh, I know that school, he can take it."

Wonderful!

He never told me the name of the chef or anything, so... I said, ok.

That's very good, very good. What kinds of jobs? You were saying they get all kinds of jobs in these different areas. Well, what type of job does your student typically get?

Most of them get what we call a line cook position. Where they get to be... if you go to a restaurant they are the people who are going to be sautéing or broiling or grilling or baking your food that night. With experience they will move on up to more responsible positions.

So, what are the positions that would be available in a restaurant? So, if somebody said, I'd like to work in a restaurant, what can they do?

Well, the very bottom of course, is washing dishes, where I started back in high school. But, students can start a couple of rungs above that cuz they're students. There's pantry cook, prep cook, and then you work as a line cook. Then, you work as head line cook or advanced. Then there's the sauce cook. It really depends on how complex the kitchen is and its staff. Then, there's a Sous-Chef which is literally the under chef. That's the person who is second-in-command of the kitchen. Then there is the executive chef of the kitchen. So, depending on luck and talent, people just move up that ladder.

That's pretty clear-cut. If somebody wanted to, say, just be a Sous-Chef, and that's really what they want to do, is that making sauces or am I incorrect in that?

Well, in a classic kitchen, you actually have a saucier who actually does the sauce. But, very few kitchens in town have that huge of a staff just because of labor costs and everything else. But, a Sous-Chef would be making many of the things. I mean, a Sous-Chef can do everything in the kitchen. They're one of the more senior people, so they would be responsible for the more advanced things such as sauce making and final plating.

So, I guess my final question would be, can somebody just work on sauces, and not do the whole gamut of cooking? If they wanted to come to you and say, I really love making sauces, could they be just educated in that or would that be shooting themselves in the foot?

Well, it wouldn't be so much as shooting themselves in the foot, but our program is geared to an all-around education, and so all of the students take all the classes all the way through. There are a couple of electives in their final semester they can take; advanced bread baking, pastries, there's a meat cutting/butchers class, and there's a grade manger where they would be learning how to make sausages and pates and things like that. So, there are some choices there, but the students take all the classes all the way through. We don't have a class in sauce making just yet. But, sauce making is included in all the cooking classes, because whether you're in one of our beginning classes where you are learning one of our basic sauces, or you're in a cafeteria class, or the French lunch or dinner class, you are making a sauce, even in the bake shop there will be dessert sauces.

What happens to all the food you make? I mean you've got a lot of product you have coming out here.

Well, one of the things is, students have to know what they are making, so they have to eat it. Also, our program is built around serving food to the college community. So, most of the classes involve making food for one of our public dining rooms.

And, how many are there on campus?

Three, all together.

Are there?

Well, the cafeteria is considered the dining room. Then there's the JSP Café, which is an American style coffee shop. Then there's the John Dunn dining room, which has a French bistro-style lunch menu, and Thursday and Friday nights it has what I call a California wine country menu.

Those are open to the public?

Yes, they are open to the public.

Are they open every night as well or just those two nights?

Monday through Friday. Oh, the dinner is open just Thursday and Friday nights.

You have different levels of education at city college, is that correct? You can get an associate's degree, or a certificate of achievement, or a skills competency award.

Right.

What is the difference among those?

Well, the skills competency award is an in-house type of award that was devised as something a student can actually show an employer after one or maybe two semesters of education. So, if a student took the beginning sanitation class, and a beginning baking class, and the beginning bread baking class they could get a skills competency in baking or pastry arts. We have one, if they take sanitation, basic food, wine, and cooking fundamentals so they can get what I think is called, a home chef or personal chef award. Some students take only those classes because that's all they want. But, it's just to give somebody a piece of paper afterwards.

Would that be the full two years?

No, you could probably finish it off in one or two semesters. That's just a few classes. The certificate is if you take the complete program. So, whether it's our program, physics, or English, if you take their complete program you get a certificate of completion. If you take the program plus the school's general education requirements—you know, the reading, writing, and arithmetic stuff—then you get your associate's degree.

Okay.

We encourage the students to do that. With college degrees, people tend to go further and earn more.

Right, exactly.

Well Chef Randy, we need to take a break.

Okay.

When we come back we will find out what a student actually experiences in the culinary arts department at Santa Barbara City College. Stay with us.

We are talking today with Chef Randy Bublitz who is the department chair of the culinary arts and hotel management department at Santa Barbara City College. Chef Randy, when somebody signs up for the culinary arts program, how big are the classes? I mean, how much competition do they have?

Well, it's not so much competition, but, the beginning kitchen or lab classes that we have max out at 16 or 18 students per class. It's based on the number of stations we have in the room and what our chef instructor can adequately teach.

So that is relatively small...they really will get hands-on experience with good oversight.

Yes. The elective classes can get bigger, but the lab classes pretty much stay at that level or get even smaller.

When do they start their actual physical cooking?

Day one.

Is that right?

Yeah. The physical part is the cooking part and is why the students are all there. So, I think if we gave them all lectures the first semester we'd scare off a bunch of them.

Yeah, yep.

Though they have a fundamental culinary class where they learn basic cooking skills.

And what would some of those skills be? I mean, if someone were to sign up.

Well, the first thing they learn is knife skills, how to use a chef knife properly and safely. So, slicing and dicing onions, potatoes, carrots, leeks: all the vegetables.

Different techniques for different vegetables?

Well, some of them, yeah. I mean carrots and onions are put together differently. So, in some ways you would cut them differently to get the same result. They learn all the French terms for the different cuts. Usually, julienne and mirepoix. You know, because even though we're in America, cooking here with a lot of different foods, the French and European techniques or names are still used, so...

So, how do they progress? What is their education, what would they do after they do that?

Well, they have that, the culinary fundamentals class. There's a basic pantry class where they learn more stress about knives. I mean, all four semesters we really focus on the basics so they really understand that. There's a beginning baking class. Second semester they are going to put those skills to use, so they actually produce baked goods in our pastry shop. All the Danish, muffins, scones, pies, cakes, and everything else that we eat on campus they are producing themselves.

Does that mean that they have to get in at five o'clock in the morning to do the baking or is it from the night before?

A lot of it is set-up at seven in the morning when we start.

Emm, yeah.

So, it's a little early, but it's not real baker's hours.

Because in the real world, what time would it be? What time would a real baker start?

Four or five, sometimes, to be ready.

Okay, so we know bakers work early in the morning, and chefs, if they are working at a popular restaurant would be working late at night. Do you expose students to these work hours, the reality?

Well, we try to explain that to them, and expose them as much as possible. So, in the morning, we don't start too much before seven. And, at night, the Thursday and Friday night dinner classes will sometimes go until 9:30 or 10:00. But again, it's a school so we can't stay out until midnight serving multiple things, because there's a certain limit of hours that the students can be there.

What would make a student choose a career like that, that will keep them away from their families at night or in the morning? I mean is it just their love of what they're doing?

That and... yeah, you have to like food. People talk about making for serving other people, bringing substance and nutrition to other people, so there's that. There is a challenge in what I call a femoral art. Every time you cook something it has to look beautiful, but then someone's going to eat it and so it doesn't last. And, it's a challenge to making art on a practical, not to say an industrial scale, but over and over again.

Mmm, hmm.

It's like painting the Mona Lisa 43 times that night. So, that challenge is something that a lot of people look forward to.

Is there a certain personality type that you see coming through your classes?

Well, we get all personality types. The people who seem to do the best are the people who really have a passion for the food itself. You know, whether they are a little more extraverted or introverted, it doesn't seem to matter. If they have a passion for food and eating, they seem to do much better.

In the restaurant industry, there seems to be, probably more than in other areas, trends. Like what we were eating back in the 70s, we're not eating anymore.

Mmm, hmm. Yeah, you don't see kiwi anymore.

Kiwi?

Well, that was a big trend.

We don't have kiwi tarts anymore?

Well, we do, but not as much.

Oh, okay, just not as much, okay.

But, we used to use a lot more fat and things like that. I mean, there are nutritional trends and things like that, as well as the aesthetics and ambiance of a restaurant. How do you,

help your students keep up with that, or keep one step ahead of that?

Well, we research on our own: reading, watching the shows, going out. The other thing is, incorporating it. A lot of the trends start in restaurants with chefs. Then, a lot of them now are becoming more... not only within a restaurant, but as a society as a whole. So, as society becomes more interested in ecology and more interested in sustainable foods, it's very easy to pick up on those ideas and go with them and incorporate them in there so that the student understands where the food they're buying is coming from. So, it becomes part of our purchasing class. The health part, issues with food, is easily part of the nutritional class, so those things kind of just carry over everywhere.

So you actually do teach them in areas like health, kitchen sanitation, and all of that? They have to know the whole gamut.

Yes. Sanitation, nutrition, and purchasing are all part of being a chef now. It's not just being able to cook very well. Obviously that's important, but a chef has to be able to cook very well, and still maintain a healthy and safe environment for both themselves and their customers. They have to make a profit. A lot of students forget that. One of the phrases we like to tell them is, "there may be such a thing as a starving artist, but there is no such thing as a starving chef." So, if you can't make money at what you're doing or make a profit, it's going to be very hard for you to cook.

Mmm, hmm. Mmm, hmm, interesting.

What about the nutritional things that change? Like, we are seeing so much about gluten-free foods and that sort of thing. Are you able to cover that in your classes?

Yeah, and the nutritional class has seminars and lectures devoted to that, and they'll actually have some practice in cooking vegan and some other styles.

Do you foresee a class necessitated by gluten-free baking? I mean, I guess you could bake all kinds of goods without wheat flour, but you have to know how to do it. That would, I imagine, be a skill to put it together correctly.

Well, there are a lot of classes like that, which we're looking to add. Partly it's finding the time, and there are budgetary issues. Expanding the baking program is one of our desires, and that would be an obvious direction to go into.

I know you make the pastries that you talked about, but how would you expand the baking program?

Well, the gluten-free, and more emphasis on decorative techniques. You know, cake decorating, things like that, working with chocolate, pulled sugars, more techniques on producing various types of pastries and breads, and making almost a degree in itself. That's something that we are gradually working toward.

You can fit it into the two years?

Yes.

Yeah, okay. We have to take another break, and we'll be back with more from Chef Randy Bublitiz. Stay with us.

We're talking about how to become the next famous chef with Chef Randy Bublitiz from Santa Barbara City College. Chef Randy, how many students come into your program, try it for a while and decide it's not for them?

It's an issue that we have to face. I call it the Emeril effect. People see him on TV, Rachel, Bobby, and all the other TV chefs, and it looks like fun, but they don't realize that it's hot in the kitchen, you're working weekends, and it's hot in the kitchen, and there's someone yelling at you...and, did I mention how hot it was? And then, they realize it's probably not for them. But, we get that. I mean, most people start a college and change their major once or twice anyway, so we're not different in that manner. So, we have to work with that.

What are the rewards then? If the heat in the kitchen is one of the challenges, what are the rewards?

Well, the sense of accomplishment from producing a variety of different foods over the course of a dinner or lunch shift. There's a sort of level of artistry involved. And, there's a physical skill that once you get into a rhythm of, cooking and things, which has rewards in itself.

Now you were a chef in a restaurant prior to becoming a teacher. There must be personal satisfactions when you speak to the patrons and they go, "Oh that was the best I've ever had." I mean, do you miss those kinds of accolades?

Mmm, no, because...

You are still getting it?

I get it through the students. I send the students out into the dining room. They get it and they come back, and so I feel I had a little bit to do with that. I mean they did the cooking, but at least I pushed them in the right direction or something. I get it now, I guess, vicariously through them. And, the satisfaction I get is when I go downtown or to one of the local restaurants and one of our former students is now working there or is the chef, which a number of them are. That's a big thrill.

Do we have a lot in our local restaurants?

Top five or six that are the chefs in the local restaurants.

Head chefs?

Yes.

Oh wow!

And then, most of the big hotels have our students working in various capacities working in kitchens and things too. So, it's great to walk in there and see our students working.

And, briefly touch on the hotel management part, because that is also your department.

Right.

Are students successful getting jobs in hotel management?

Yes, part of it is a work-based learning program. So, they're getting jobs and actually working in the positions that they are learning about; front of the house, housekeeping, front desk management. While doing all that stuff, they are learning and they're becoming very successful in the local hotel industry.

Okay so, how do you create those associations with the local businesses that will take your students on as interns?

Well, part of it's personal, part of it is just the fact that we've been in town as a department for almost 40 years now, so we have a lot of connections.

That's 40 years?

Yes, 40 years.

I didn't want people to think it was only four years. 40, yeah.

Yeah, so there are a lot of connections. A lot of times the people we are talking to are alumni. All the staff that teaches at the college has or is currently working locally. So, we have all those connections with the current industry. The local industry has been very supportive of what we've been doing.

If somebody out there watching us now loves to cook and would like to hone their skills, not because they want to work in the field, but because they want to work efficiently in their kitchen or if they're entertaining friends, can they sign up for some of these classes?

Well, the classes are, as a community college, open to the public. Any student who signs up automatically becomes a student.

Okay. Even if they are not working toward a job?

Yeah, mmm, hmm. We don't really have just classes, per se. So, they would have to take the regular program. Part of that includes having their own uniform, their own set of knives, taking some of the prerequisite classes like sanitation and everything. Because we can't have... as a professional program we have to maintain the professionalism. So, if someone is going to abide by those standards, a student is a student, and we will teach everybody. And, who knows, maybe they will decide to open their own business.

They very well could, and being a personal chef is another thing to. If you don't want to serve a 120 people a night you could serve a family of five.

Yes. And, there's enough families that need personal chefs in town and locally.

So, what are the things that you need if you're starting? You need a uniform which is...?

A chef coat, pants, and an apron. We usually tell people to have two of them. You know, wearing one, washing one kind of thing. Their own set of chef's knives.

How many in a set of chef's knives?

Let's see... there is the main knife itself, the chef knife, a paring knife, a boning knife, a slicer, a honing steel, a thermometer, and a peeler. So, six or seven things.

Oh. And, that's it?

Yeah, to start. As they start moving up there, they might get specialized with some more expensive knives. We tell the students not to buy the most expensive knives to start. Buy something that is a little more economical for them. Knives are like our musical instrument. So, when you are learning to play the guitar you don't buy the most expensive one, you get a good basic guitar. Then, once you understand your instrument you know what feels right in your hand and how it works, you make a better judge of buying it.

This seems like a wonderful opportunity for a person of any age to start a new career. Do you have a waiting list? Do you have to send people away?

We do send people away, especially in the beginning fall semesters only because we have a limited amount of space. We have 18 students in the beginning class, and we have three sections so, 54 students. How the community colleges operate is on first come first serve. So, if you sign up early, you get the time and class you want. If you wait until the last minute, there might not be room for you. They can do what the college students do, it's called "crashing," show up and hope to get in.

Yeah, hope somebody drops out.

And, that sometimes happens and sometimes doesn't.

Well Chef Randy, thank you very much for sharing this with us. I know you've made me hungry, and I think you're doing a wonderful service for the folks in our community who want to make this their career.

Well thank you. Thanks for having me.

Well thank you very much for being with us. And, thank you very much for joining us on this addition of Line to Learning, we hope to see you again next time.