Culinary Arts: Feeding a Passion for Learning

Introduction:
Welcome to Salem Stories – a podcast by Salem School District discussing topics of interest to parents, students, and the Salem community.

I’m you host – David Halpin – and this is Episode 5 – Culinary Arts: Feeding a Passion for Learning.

Narrator

Salem High School Culinary students have had a few short weeks of practice leading up to today’s lunch service. Chef and Program Director Jeff Bratz gives last minute instructions to students before they head to their stations.

Kitchen Sounds

Line it up! Guys line it up for a moment. Let’s talk about what we’re doing today...all the restauranteurs are going to start showing up at 11:00...at 11:00 we’re going to be seating representatives from the Tuscan Kitchen, the Common Man...

Narrator

It’s opening day for the 3 Seasons Restaurant and the first plate of food will soon be served to customers and members of the culinary program advisory board.

The restaurant is located in a corner of the high school near where the automotive garage used to be. The new 3 Seasons is a clean, modern eating space with 18-foot, floor-to-ceiling windows, seating for 50, and an outdoor patio area.

Jeffrey Bratz

Our previous restaurant location was difficult to find, we didn’t have a street entrance, and there was no real parking for customers. Then, of course, the renovations forced us to close the restaurant and restructure the program to focus more on planning and preparing meals for take home. With the new space and equipment, we can expand the curriculum to include interacting with customers and making individual plates of food – like a real restaurant does.

Kitchen Sounds

Check your stations...the first thing I want you guys to do is grab your lists...identify everything on your list...and wipe down and sanitize the stations...Ok?

Narrator

As Chef Bratz orchestrates students to their various cooking stations, Assistant Chef & Instructor Kaci Ahern greets the first customers arriving out front. It’s about to get real.
Good Morning and welcome to the 3 Seasons Restaurant.

Frank and Lillian Serio arrive for their 11:30 reservation. Lillian soaks in the new space and selects a sun-bathed table next to the large window wall. Looking out over Geremonty Drive and past the Salem Town Hall, she can almost see her condo.

The elderly couple has been walking across the street to the 3 Seasons Restaurant since it first opened years ago in the back of the school. When they received the grand opening invitation, they were first in line to try out the new location.

A culinary student in a blue polo shirt and a server’s apron nervously approaches the table, trying to speak clearly, make eye contact, and remember the sequence of questions he should ask.

My name is Jack. I’ll be your server today...can I start you off with some drinks.

With that, the first service of the 2018 culinary program is underway.

Lillian orders the fish and chips and Frank the seared salmon filet. The meal proceeds without incident with several courses prepared and served in a timely manner. When coffee is served, I take a moment to join the Serio’s to get their impressions of the new space and the meal.

All the past years we’ve been coming here...it’s very good...it’s gourmet food for Pete’s sake for peanuts.

As fans of the restaurant and the culinary program, the Serio’s have been watching the construction with anticipation and are more than pleased with the finished product.

Never expected anything like this...really nice... We’ve been here all these years...boy what a change...

But it’s not just the food and atmosphere that keeps the Serio’s coming back. They appreciate the benefit the program provides to both the students and the community.

Helps the kid get a start...these are jobs that are not going to disappear. You have to have barbers, and hair dressers, and cooks...waiters...nobody wants to be served by a robot.
It may take these students a few more meals to sharpen their skills, but they’re getting a crash course in what it’s like to be in a working kitchen – and that’s what Bratz has been waiting for.

Jeff Bratz

Our Culinary 1 & 2 students will rotate through various stations each week. One week they’ll be at the soup station, the next week they’ll be at the grill and griddle station, and then move on to the Panini and flat bread station. This is what they’ll experience in the real world…they’ll need to learn continuously and adapt to change in the workplace.

Along with learning how to cook and prepare food, they learn to communicate and collaborate with their classmates, they learn about accountability, and working to a high standard.

Narrator

April is a junior in the culinary arts 2 program. She hopes to work in the food industry one day and explains how preparing meals for actual diners adds to the sense of urgency in the kitchen.

April (Student)

You have to get this done...like you just can’t be walking around in our own world...we actually have to stay on task with what we’re doing and it gives me not so much pressure but gives me like feeling like I would like to do this correctly and I don’t want to mess this up...I know everyone does in the kitchen, but it just gives you that feeling of move as fast as you can, make this as quickly as you can, but as best as you can.

Narrator

While the main focus of the program is the development of culinary knowledge and skills, Bratz has worked hard to integrate math and language arts principals into the process.

Jeff Bratz

We’ve had students come into the program who may have struggled with math in the traditional sense, such as working with fractions. In the kitchen, you’re constantly portioning ingredients and working a half cup of this or a quart of that. Pretty soon they are doing math and don’t even know it.

Narrator

Students also gain exposure to kitchen management – by assuming the role of sous chef they are responsible for creating menus, product inventory, ordering food and working with vendors -- all the business administrative functions that go into planning daily meals at a restaurant.

As the students file in prior to today’s lunch service, Robert – a senior in the Culinary Arts 2 program – just learned his role for the day.

Robert 1 (Student)

Today I am the sous chef, and my role as the sous chef is to lead the kitchen, the best I can, and that is a challenge I’m willing to take and I’m excited for the opportunity.

Narrator
Today Robert’s skills in the kitchen will be tested as well as his ability to work closely with his classmates to make sure the food is prepared well and served on time. For Robert, and the other students, this is about as real as it gets. And this is what Bratz sees as the benefit of the program.

Jeff Bratz

This real-world application requires students to adopt a different mindset and work with a sense of urgency – all while maintaining the highest food safety and kitchen sanitation standards.

In addition to the restaurant, we cater a number of school-related functions. You really see the students get excited when they know they are preparing food for their classmates, parents, and teachers.

There’s a real sense of pride and achievement.

Narrator

Students can get a taste for the program by enrolling in Introduction to Culinary Arts – a half credit quarterly course where they’ll get instruction in the fundamentals of food preparation, baking, and other aspects of dining room service.

Culinary Arts 1 & 2 are year-long courses where the more advanced skills are taught and students begin working with the Three Seasons Restaurant and other catering functions.

Program graduates emerge with a set of skills that prepare them for direct employment in local restaurants or catering companies. Many will continue their education at local community culinary schools.

And – even if they decide a future in cooking isn’t on the menu – students gain valuable skills they’ll use throughout their lifetime.

Thank you for listening to this Edition of Salem Stories – Culinary Arts: Feeding a Passion for Learning.

We’ve been discussing the 2018 opening of Salem High School’s newly-remodeled 3 Season Restaurant and how the Culinary Arts program is inspiring the next generation of chefs.

I want to thank program Director and Chef Jeff Bratz, along with Assistant Chef Kaci Ahern and the Culinary Program students for sharing their stories with me as well as sharing their talents and culinary delights with Salem diners.

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