

# High School Culinary Arts

by Ivy Ashe



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Floral dresses and plaid shirts disappeared beneath white chef coats, and hairnets snapped over buns and flat-ironed hair. Hands were washed. Chef hats adjusted. Fourteen students, primarily sophomores, gathered around a long metal prep table in room 214 of Martha's Vineyard Regional High School.

Culinary arts instructor Jack O'Malley, wearing a tall white toque and sporting a close-cropped beard, stood at the far end of the table, ready with the morning's directive. The next week was full of senior project

presentations and faculty meetings, all of which required snacks and hors d'oeuvres.

Enter the culinary students.

Jack dished out baking and cooking assignments to the young chefs: raspberry muffins here, finger sandwiches there.

"These are my favorite, favorite, favorite cookie," Jack said, searching through a sheaf of recipes to find the right one—lime glacier—and handing it to sophomore Amber Cappelli. Amber and partner Jessica Haynes studied the sheet and then went to work, gathering ingredients from the pantry.

Across the table, fingers flicking over iPhone calculators, students doubled and tripled recipes. The culinary arts room is the size of four desk-and-chair classrooms, without a desk in sight. Instead, there are three main stations, all featuring professional grade equipment: the prep table, the cooking island—with stoves and ovens on either side—and, the bane of every chef's existence, the dishwashing area. Chatter bounced back and forth as the students began to work.

"Who has the baking powder?"

"Do we have more pastry flour?"

"Chef, where's the almond extract?"

The immediate goal was simple: prep for a busy week ahead. And the long-term objective was no less direct: get students ready for future careers with hands-on coursework and real-world experience. It's a goal shared by all of the specialties in the regional high school's vocational program, which also includes tracks in horticulture, automotive, and

There are 68 vocational education program districts in Massachusetts, but only one on Martha's Vineyard. Some districts have schools whose focus is traditional vocational education: students alternate weeks of academic courses and weeks of training. The Vineyard's program is integrated: vocational courses are taken as electives alongside an academic schedule.

The concentrations offered by the program are specifically geared to prepare high schoolers for entry into the Island economy — as future landscapers, builders, and, of course, chefs. Junior Nichole Wilson and her family moved here earlier this year, and although she loved many things about the Martha's Vineyard Public Charter School, it didn't have a culinary program like the one at her old school. So she opted for the regional high school, Nichole explained, as she hand-rolled orchiette pasta with fellow junior Jeffrey McCormick.

Jack has been teaching culinary arts at the high school for ten years. The culinary group is a small one. Students get a taste of the program during their freshman year in an exploratory course that exposes them to each of the vocational tracks. As sophomores, they can choose a focus. Jack says there are typically about 30 sophomores in culinary, but the number dwindles by senior year to less than ten, as kids home in on other interests. The commitment of those remaining is unquestioned, though, and, by senior year, some kids are in the culinary room every period of the day.

Early classes in the sophomore program focus on Jack's skill packets, featuring the building blocks chefs need in order to succeed: essential entrées; basic soups; how to bake the perfect chocolate cake. Master those, and you can do anything.

"Creativity's part of it, but you have to learn the basics first," Jack says. Too many people see cooking-made-easy on the Food Network, he says, when really the key to success as a chef is enjoying the hard work involved. That sense of accomplishment comes once basic mastery and individual creativity collide.

In keeping with the career preparation focus, part of the program is purely business-minded — students must take a business class, which focuses on resumé writing and entrepreneurial skills. (It's no wonder, then, that culinary alumnus Max Moreis' cupcake booth won Best Booth at the Ag Fair in 2012, its first year of existence.)

Some jump straight into the restaurant or catering field upon graduation, but most go on to culinary school. (The Culinary Institute of America and Johnson & Wales are common choices.) This year, senior honors student, football player, and jazz trumpeter Aaron Lowe is heading off to the New England Culinary Institute.

Aaron got his first restaurant job as a prep cook at l'étoile in Edgartown after his sophomore year in culinary and has been there ever since.

"I've always liked cooking," Aaron said, as he smoked littleneck

cook at home all the time.”

On that day, Aaron was focused on a set menu: the featured lineup for the program’s annual spring feast, a benefit dinner sponsored by Island Grown Initiative (IGI) with proceeds going to the high school garden. The students are often making full-course meals for local groups who hold events in the small dining room space adjacent to the kitchen (the Rotary Club and the Council on Aging are frequent visitors) but this was the first five-course meal they’d attempted.

And though the culinary program collaborates with IGI for the benefit dinners twice per year, this was the first they would host off-site —at the Sweet Life Café, owned by guest chef Kevin Crowell. (Kevin also owns Détente in Edgartown. His sous-chef there, Josh Morrill, is a culinary program alum.)

“I just proposed trying to do something different for the kids, try to get them out of school,” Kevin said in between offering cooking advice to the class as they blanched veggies and stirred ragouts.

The spring feast menu was designed by Kevin, based on “what was available,” he said. “The season decided... I was just out in my van knocking on doors trying to see who had what. People have been very generous with donating.”

And so the menu is an abridged who’s who of Island farmers: local squid, skate wing, and littlenecks from Menemsha Fish House; heritage-breed turkey and spicy pork sausages from the Farm Institute; foraged sea beans from Chilmark (Kevin found those himself); garlic, lemon balm, Egyptian onions, and honey mustard from Down Island Farm; cucumbers, lettuce, and tomatoes from Thimble Farm.

“Yesterday they were cutting up and cleaning the fresh squid that came in,” Kevin said. “Usually people are used to seeing them in packages and rings and it was nice seeing a whole squid with the mantle and the body all together.”

“The biggest thing is the opportunities the kids get on the Island, with all of the restaurants and all of the chefs,” Jack says. “The connections these kids make are incredible.”

An hour before guests are scheduled to arrive at the Sweet Life Café, senior Avery Lazes is gearing up to work the hot line in the kitchen. Sophomore Amy Ferguson is nearby at a prep station, getting the bread pudding ready. Junior Dakota Fogg joins Avery on the hot line. Dakota’s apron has Chef Snoopy, complete with sunglasses, embroidered on it, a gift from his great-uncle.

Kevin is here, too, offering the students advice on how to properly plate a dish. He demonstrates a neat swoosh of honey mustard on a white plate; Dakota and Avery quickly take over the swooshing, both completely at ease on the line.

“This is a lot more like catering than restaurants because everything’s prepped already,” Avery says. He’s an old hand at

with her business.

Dakota started in the culinary program as a freshman, and has worked the hot line at the Grill on Main in Edgartown for the past two summers. But baking is his favorite discipline, and his specialty is apple fritters.

“I’ve never had one of your apple fritters!” Avery says, mid-swoosh. His personal favorite dish is a veggie burger, which he says is so delicious it has converted many veggie burger nonbelievers. Avery came up with the recipe one day in class, making use of “whatever we had.”

“We’re given a lot of freedom from Chef,” he says. “Cooking is cooking for him.”

But what the students learn outside of the classroom matters most to Jack. Events like the Spring Feast are “essential,” he says. “I love when my students get to spend time with other chefs; it’s priceless. They definitely rise to the occasion.”

The first course goes out and Kevin, Avery and Dakota gear up for another round, setting out clean white plates on the line. They’ll be getting the Menemsha Fish House skate ready.

“We’re going to try to do it in waves of ten,” Kevin says. “So pick a spot, take some tongs, a spoon, put a little pile on, then you can take the skate away.”

Avery and Dakota grab latex gloves out of a box, and pull them on.

It’s go time.

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