

A Recipe for Change:

Greenville County Schools' Culinary Creations

BY ASHLEY WARLICK

Chef Patrick Wagner, in his toque and whites, is pacing the line. The kitchen at the Greenville Tech Culinary Institute of the Carolinas hums with teams of students, each preparing a different soup that must be ready to serve by the end of class. It smells like garlic and rosemary, cumin and steam, your basic Mediterranean staples. These students are in their second day of training. They've learned the difference between a julienne and a brunoise, that cabbages are from the *brassica* family of vegetables, that a watermelon cannibalizes itself as it ripens, that a well-made consommé is so clear, you can read the date on a dime in the bottom of the bowl.

These students are also lunch ladies, three quarters of them, anyway: men and women employed in the cafeterias of elementary schools across Greenville County, preparing to take the Culinary Creations menu into the 2012/2013 school year.

For the uninitiated, Culinary Creations is the brainchild of Ron Jones, professional chef and district culinary specialist, and Eileen Staples, director of Food and Nutrition Services. It came about in answer to the changing profile of public school cafeterias across the nation, and the greater push towards fresher, more local, more nutritious institutional food. Based on whole grains, fruits and vegetables, lower sodium and reasonable protein portions, these changes in what's for lunch mean one big change to how it gets made: according to Ron, "Our cafeterias have to go back to scratch cooking."

Which means that a kitchen staff accustomed to opening cans now needs a whole new set of skills, and the confidence to go with them. This past summer, nearly 160 workers from across the county spent a week at Greenville Tech in their own toques, learning knife techniques and flavor profiles, how to properly sear, steam, purchase and store unprocessed foods.

These are the people feeding our children. What they do in this kitchen, in their own kitchens, is wildly important.

But here's what they know already: where the pots are kept, the ladles and spoons and spatulas, how to run an industrial oven and light a range, how to calibrate thermometers, and fill a bain marie. They know each other, school to school, especially as some of them are rovers in the district. And they look out for each other: who's leaned too far over a hot skillet, who needs the breadcrumbs next. In other words, these are people who move with a certain amount of ease and authority even in a kitchen they've never used before. And to a number, they are excited and anxious about the week ahead.

"Recipes are standards, laws even," says Chef Patrick, "but you have to have some cooking common sense." Through the course of the week's training, Chef Patrick says piles of magnificent things, esoteric things, goofy things. *Beans are what we eat to entertain our families. Even if you end up cutting yourself, a sharp knife causes less trauma. Lavender blossoms and black pepper make a great rub for beef tenderloin. And it's important to show pride in what you've made.* He teaches garnishes and eight-sided cuts of potatoes to this group, even as they'll probably never use them. Chef Patrick believes in training, obviously. He's a graduate of the Culinary Institute himself. "Knowledge is power," he says. Attention to detail shows you care.

Over the course of this week, students will have 20 hours in the kitchen and 20 hours in the classroom. Down the hall, the second half of the class is putting in their desk time. They talk in terms of good nutrition: whole grain choices and fatty acids, portion control and food labels. The fact of the matter is that one in four kids are food insecure in SC, with 35,000 students eating free or reduced meals in Greenville County alone. Pair this with the fact that more than 42% of kids here are overweight, and Greenville County Schools' food services has the opportunity to be a major force in sustaining child health.

Across the district, schools are integrating the cafeteria's prac-



Clockwise from top left: Eileen Staples and Ron Jones; Chef Patrick Wagner over the soup pot; Lunch trays might never change; Chris Widener of Monaview Elementary preps her vegetables for chicken noodle soup.



Clockwise from top left: The stoplight logo from the CATCH program, slow on whole grain pasta; Chef Patrick helps Theresia Wierenja with her white bean puree; Class, at attention; During training, the day's kitchen work was also the day's lunch; Part of class involved a field trip to the culinary school's herb garden—here, a sample of lemongrass.



tices into the classroom, and beyond. The CATCH program (Coordinated Approach to Child Health) standardizes the language we use to talk about food and fitness. In the cafeteria line, kids see traffic lights over each dish being served: “go” foods, which are great to eat, “slow” foods we like in moderation, and “whoa” foods which are occasional treats. Local pediatricians’ offices use the same language, as does an exhibit at the Children’s Museum on nutrition; kids are encouraged to talk about food this way at home. Ron Jones talks about this as “shopping cart education.” When he was first developing Culinary Creations in 2009, he was working in the kitchens of the brand new AJ Whittenburg Elementary, and in daily contact with the kids in his lunchline. He tells the story of running into one of his students in the grocery one afternoon, literally: “This kid rammed his cart into mine, saying ‘Chef Jones, Chef Jones, look in our cart! We’ve got all go foods!’” Ron laughs. “Of course, they hadn’t left the produce department.” But this kind of excitement is a powerful engine.

The menu will be live in 30 schools across the district this fall, and in many of them, it’s already driven a particular excitement about health. At Sterling Elementary, principal David Johnstone puts the Lentil Sloppy Joes on his Twitter feed. At Heritage Elementary, the lunchroom staff led the whole school population on a fitness walk around campus. Education no longer stops at the cafeteria wall.

Back in the kitchen, Chef Patrick is checking his watch. “Okay, guys. Forty minutes. Four-oh. Bride and groom will be here.” There’s some anxiety to greet this. *Are the noodles done? Does anybody have the garlic, the Parmesan, the broom? Can you believe somebody ran off with my spoon?* Chris Widener of Monaview Elementary is preparing a variation of chicken noodle soup with the noodles cooked in the stock. She rushes to the dry storage for her bag of pasta. “I feel like I’m in Heck’s Kitchen,” she says, laughing. “You know that show?”

Theresa Wierenja of Simpsonville Elementary pushes her white bean soup through a chinois for a silky smooth puree. She’s mumbling: “Croutons, croutons, what happened to the croutons. I thought somebody made them.” Assistant Chef Connie Bridgeman steps in with a bag of bread and bottle of oil to the rescue.

“The way you get splashed is to pour slowly,” Chef Patrick says over the industrial blender. “Anytime you pour, you got to pour it quick.”

Cindy Batson of Monaview Elementary struggles with the cornstarch slurry she’s used to thicken her soup. “Chef Patrick? It’s me again,” she says, carrying her pot over.

Chef says that’s the most common thing he hears from his cafeteria students: *I don’t know how to cook*. He shakes his head: “They’ve been doing this for 20 years.”

The clock is winding down.

Once everyone’s dishes are plated in long stainless shotgun pans, we assemble at the front of the kitchen, food under the heat lamps for inspection. We talk about the difference between a coarse, rustic tomato and chickpea soup versus a version half-subjected to the immersion blender, the difference between hearty and thick, (which is related to the difference between appetizing and glue) and what happens to the flavor profile when you add a shot of cumin and curry. We talk about ways to make the pureed roasted root vegetables look tastier, painting a ripple into the surface with a spatula. Are the glazed carrots more tempting than the roasted ones? We think so. And more importantly, it matters what the customer thinks, the school kid on the other side of that line. Because these kids might be paying \$2.00 or \$0.40 or nothing



From top: A waiting tray at Summit Drive; Alea Martin of Summit Drive Elementary; This year's apples will come from crops in Hendersonville.



at all, but the true value at stake here is whether or not the healthy choice looks like the one they want to make.

And choice is what we're talking about. Instead of the traditional school menu options of one thing or the other, Culinary Creations offers four to six different possible combinations per meal, but a student's lunchtime is still the same half hour. "We don't have time to wait for the kids to say what they want," Ron says. The new menu requires cafeteria staff to interact with the students more, to guide them, to know them and their tastes better when they step up to the line. Remembering his time at AJ Wittenberg, Ron Jones tells me how the staff would dance when somebody ordered oatmeal for breakfast. "Ansel and I had kids eating oatmeal like it was going out of style."

I've spent many a midday in the cafeteria at Summit Drive Elementary, where my son is in third grade. Tray after tray goes by with soup and salad, what strikes me as the epitome of a healthy meal. Whole apples applauded over fruit cocktail. No child is allowed to leave the serving area without a fruit or vegetable on their plate. But more importantly, impressively, magnificently from a community perspective: not a child goes through there who's not called by name.

Ron Jones has been crunching the numbers all summer, and not only for the Culinary Creations menu, where nutrition stats exceed all national requirements per plate, but across the board, in middle school and high school regular menus too. New regulations got handed down this summer from the USDA, driving the lunch tray to look more like the MyPlate nutritional guidelines, and every school district in the nation must now snap to compliance. Most significantly, where there were once minimum standards to meet, there are now maximums as well. A whole grain sub roll can be too much whole grain for the week, a white meat chicken patty too much protein. "I've been in this business for 26 years," Ron says. "I'm an old-timer. This is a revolution coming."

And that revolution isn't just a local one. In order to stay compliant, food service suppliers are going to have to change their offerings. School districts are now buying a healthier, whole muscle chicken nugget, lower sodium pizza with whole grain crust, smaller burgers, more dark leafy greens and legumes in order to serve a meal that meets the standard for federal reimbursement.

While the changes are national, Ron puts an emphasis on local sourcing wherever financially possible. Last year, the Greenville County Schools spent over \$265,000 on local produce, which (according to EcoTrust, a community conservation think tank)

results in nearly \$500,000 of stimulus in the local economy. This fall, lunch trays will see the tail end of the local watermelon and peaches, Hendersonville apples, local cabbage.

School food service is self-supporting, an independent business from the school district, and Ron says, “one of the few government agencies that has to be profitable.” It costs thousands of dollars to train each employee, money largely sourced from private gifts and grants, local benefactors such as BMW and Michelin, Greenville Hopsital System and Joe Erwin of Erwin Penland, not the tax base. But in the end, there is something fundamentally potent about offering such an opportunity. A couple of workers have gone back to college, inspired by the training they got at Greenville Tech.

Some of the workers come from a culinary background to start with. Paula Wambeke, cafeteria manager of the brand new Monarch Elementary, earned a degree in baking and pastry from Baltimore International Culinary School. Her first job was cooking for a day-care when her family lived in Missouri, an experience she calls both humbling and life changing. She says, “I can still remember a call over the intercom, they needed more chicken pot pie in Room Whatever. When I brought it in, this little boy says, I like your cooking. That sealed the deal.”

We talk at Paula’s kitchen table after she and her staff completed training at Greenville Tech, her fifth grade son Tal and his friend Holly Bruccoliere joining us. Holly spent last year as the food critic on Jump Start, the televised morning announcements at Stone Academy. She shows me her scripts where she brought Culinary Creations dishes on air for the news anchors to sample, talked about the ingredients, what she liked about them, and gave them ratings. She and Tal both agree: stuffed shells were a clear favorite. When I ask why, Tal gives it his best shot: “They were interesting. Moist-chewy. Pasta-y.” He looks at Holly and they laugh. But that’s what kids want; food that tastes like its name, that tastes like it should. And to those ends, Holly says she used to be a lunchbox girl, but now she usually buys.

Paula says that was one of the fun parts of training, trying things like the veggie tacos with tempeh, a shot of cocoa powder in the seasoning. “By the time you got everything on it, it tasted like a taco.” From a kitchen standpoint, learning new terminology and techniques as a staff was key. “Being able to say, do that pasta, but do it the risotto method.” They’ve found a new way to understand each other, and a healthy context to do it in.

Tal’s watching her. He says, “You’re so proud.”

“I am,” she says. “I am.” 🍌



From top: Ricardo Ontiveros of Summit Drive Elementary; Paula Wambeke of Monarch Elementary and her son, Tal



CHEF PATRICK ON...

LEFTOVERS:

"Diced ham in our freezer is a plan. A whole ham in our freezer is just something to work around." One of the big issues with the Culinary Creations menu is that staff can no longer predict just how many meals of what sort will be sold. Just like at home, leftovers are a fact of life in a scratch cooking kitchen. Be prepared for what comes next in the life of those apples, that cooked chicken breast, that tomato sauce, before you store it.

KNIVES:

"Pinch the blade of the knife between your thumb and forefinger to keep your knife from rolling." This is about safety, about control and precision, but too, it's about confidence. If you trust your knife is going to stay in your hand, you can move more quickly. The more quickly you move, the more efficient your time in the kitchen.

"Carry your knife by your side. Wash your knife yourself. Never leave a knife in the sink." You're starting to get the idea? Your knife is more than a tool, or maybe it's *the* tool. Regardless, care for it carefully.

THE FOOD CHAIN:

"You are what you eat. You are what you eat eats." Chickens that graze free range have more fatty acids in their eggs than those eating conventional feed. Chef Patrick raises chickens, and there was some kind of competition talk about taste tests, baking tests, some kind of throwdown between conventional eggs and Chef Patrick's homegrown. In other words, this is a guy who does it himself because he believes it's important, and because he believes he can do it better than the average mega-mart dozen. (See page 28: Attention to detail shows you care.)

SCIENCE:

"The gas given off from ripening fruit in the refrigerator causes your greens to wilt." Cooking is chemistry, too. When you add an acid to a cooked green vegetable, (lemon in your broccoli, vinegar in your collards,) it begins to lose its color, so add it at the last minute. Consider storage, and timing, carefully.

FEEDING KIDS:

"Expose children to many types of food in different forms." Chef Patrick recommends using preparation vehicles, like mac and cheese, to introduce new flavors. And don't just think in terms of "kid's food." Chef Patrick's three-year-old niece hates mushrooms, but loves truffle butter.

"If you make special meals for your kids, they'll never want to eat what's at the table." The deal Chef Patrick keeps with his daughter is that if he makes it...she will try it.

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CARROT GINGER SOUP

Also a Culinary Creations recipe, this one's a favorite in lunch-rooms with parents and students alike.

- ¼ cup canola oil
- 1 pound carrots, peeled and diced
- 1 large onion, diced
- 3 stalks celery, diced
- ¼ cup cake flour
- ½ tablespoon ginger
- 3 tablespoons soy sauce
- 12 cups beef stock
- ¼ cup orange juice
- kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat oil over medium heat and sauté carrots, onions and celery until vegetables are translucent. Add flour to make roux and cook an additional 3-5 minutes.

Add half stock and bring to a boil, stirring, then add remaining stock and seasonings. Simmer for 30 minutes.

Puree soup in batches in a blender until smooth. Adjust seasoning and return to stove to heat through.

Serves 10-12.

TOMATO CHICKPEA SOUP WITH BASIL

This is a Greenville County Schools' Culinary Creations Recipe, scaled down to serve one (large) household. Try Chef Patrick's variation with an additional 1 teaspoon cumin and ½ table-spoon curry powder.

- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 1 large onion, diced
- 3 stalks celery, diced
- 3 large carrots, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 8 ounces fresh spinach, washed and chopped
- 28 ounce can diced tomatoes
- 16 ounces canned chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 3 cups tomato sauce
- 2 cups low sodium chicken broth (or vegetable broth)
- 1/3 cup Parmesan cheese, finely grated
- 1 teaspoon dried basil
- kosher salt and fresh ground black pepper

Heat oil in a large kettle and sauté the onion, celery and carrots for 10 minutes, until soft. Add garlic, and sauté 2 minutes longer. Add diced tomatoes, chickpeas, tomato sauce and broth, and return to a simmer for 10 minutes, allowing the flavors to blend. Finish with basil, salt and pepper to taste. (May be refrigerated at this point overnight. Return to a simmer before continuing.)

Add spinach and cheese, stirring to wilt spinach. Serves 12.

