

Chefs visit schools to inspire culinary students

By Joleen Oshiro Jan 28, 2015



Chef Paul Rivera's handiwork, demonstrated for Farrington High School cooking students, included a duck made from a yellow squash.



Paul Rivera, sous chef at Duke's Waikiki, helps Farrington High School student Bill Dela Cruz practice his carving technique on a mushroom. Rivera is part of the Duke's mentoring team that is paired with Farrington's culinary program.



Ronnie Capitle, right, a kitchen supervisor at Duke's Waikiki, talks to students in a Farrington High School culinary arts class about his job handling the duties of garde manger, or cold food platters, which includes creating elaborate garnishes using fruits and vegetables.

All eyes were glued to Ronnie Capitle's deft hands as he anchored paper-thin slices of beets on a toothpick, twirling it as he went along to create a vivid vegetable rose in less than a minute. The same can be done with other produce, he said, demonstrating next with slices of a yellow-fleshed sweet potato.

Capitle's mesmerizing handiwork kept his audience glued to his every word, his work punctuating his message: Excellence takes dedication, practice and patience.

"Try. If it doesn't work out, keep going. Don't give up," he urged. Case in point: Perfecting his beet rose took eight years.

During a class in October, Capitle, 34, a kitchen supervisor at Duke's Waikiki, shared his craft of "garde manger," or cold food platters, with students of Farrington High School's culinary arts program. He's part of a yearlong mentorship program organized by the Hawaii Culinary Education Foundation. Garde manger includes garnishes, often elaborate, which explains Capitle's specific artistry.

Capitle said that for years, after his shifts in Duke's kitchen, where he's worked for 16 years, he went home to practice his skills.

"Slowly, I began learning garde manger," he said. "You gotta have passion to be successful. And you gotta have goals."

Today, Capitle handles Duke's VIP platters, stamped with his special touches like those lovely roses, displayed on a pineapple crown.

"This class helps me to open my eyes to the types of work in the culinary field. It's not just cooking," said Rhansell Ramirez, 17, a student in Melinda Korenaga's class. "Garde manger focuses on being artistic, on bringing out the beauty in food. Young kids avoid vegetables, but this gives it a whole new aspect."

Capitle is a member of the Duke's team, led by executive chef Keith Steel Kong, that is partnering with Farrington for a second year. The program involves 24 schools on Oahu, Maui and Hawaii island. Eventually it will include Kauai schools as well.

The program supports high school culinary teachers, who don't always have extensive culinary experience, by pairing them with professional chefs who provide students with practical knowledge of the field.

"Each partnership is very different. Teachers have very specific ideas of what they need," said Hayley Matson-Mathes, a foundation member and co-organizer of the program. "One program is about how to start a food business and develop a business plan. One is focused on sustainability, one is all about sous vide cooking, another is about grilling."

Matson-Mathes said exposure to chefs motivates youths to consider the culinary field as a profession. One of the hopes of the foundation is that students will continue their culinary education in Hawaii and pursue a career in the local industry.

It turned out the chefs were definitely on board to do their part, said Matson-Mathes. "There were no halfhearted responses, just overwhelming yeses," she said.

Kong sees the program as "a wonderful opportunity to give back." "I found the teacher in me again," he said. "I was fortunate to have great chefs teach me. It's a way of perpetuating a tradition and carrying on a craft."

At Farrington, teachers Korenaga and Tracy Hatanaka say the mentorship has benefited their program and their students in myriad ways, thanks to Kong. To start, he lends legitimacy to their lessons.

"He comes wearing his chef's whites, so when he delivers the information it's more believable for students," said Hatanaka. "In my class there are lots of demos and labs," said Korenaga. "It's more interesting for students when the lessons come from a chef. I can put up PowerPoint presentations, but when there's a chef doing something in front of them, you can see them transform. They're a bit more eager; they're maybe more creative in their projects."

Almost equally important, Kong garnered support from D. Otani Produce, Duke's and other food businesses to donate food supplies and kitchen equipment to the school. Farrington now has four new mixers and a warming cabinet, all courtesy of Duke's.

"Before Otani came in, we were only able to teach basic carving on apples, oranges and cucumbers. That's all we could afford," said Korenaga. Students now are working with a wider range of ingredients that enables their lessons to advance while exposing them to new foods. A supply of goat cheese, for instance, broadened students' horizons on cheese, and for some, Capitle's beets were their first experience with the veggie.

Kong began working with schools 12 years ago when he mentored culinary classes at Kaimuki High School. Over the years, he's developed an internship program for his students.

"They need exposure to get into the culinary field," he said. "It's exciting to have young minds come in, and it's an eye-opener for them." So far, 19 students have come through his kitchen, and 18 are still there. "It's rewarding to partner with schools, but the icing on the cake is when students come and work for us and climb up the kitchen ladder," he said.

Kong may have another intern in Ashley Clayton, 16, a student in Hatanaka's class. For Clayton the kitchen has long been an interesting, familiar place.

"I grew up with a background in cooking — my grandpa was a chef at Fort DeRussy," she said. "Everyone taught me how to cook. At 8 my uncles taught me to barbecue steak, then I progressed to adobo. At 9 or 10 I was baking. I made pasta, fried rice, all kinds of stuff. Instead of watching the Disney Channel, I watched Food Network."

Clayton listened closely as Kong talked to her class about positions in a restaurant kitchen.

"Executive chef sounded interesting, but it seems like it's only paperwork," said Clayton afterward. "I think I like the sous-chef or chef de cuisine positions."

Ultimately, she said, she'd like to be a TV chef or own a small restaurant. "I know I have the passion. Let's see if I can go far."



Farrington High School students show off the roses they made using thin slices of beets, sweet potatoes and red potatoes. Ian Magaoay, left, Rhan Sell, Marie DeGuzman, Andrei Castillo and Ryan Domingo learned the new skill from a team of chefs from Duke's Waikiki.