School cooks up culinary success

The Louisiana Culinary Institute recently moved in to a new 30,000-square-foot facility on Airline Highway that features three labs, an herb garden and a full-service restaurant.

Other features of the facility include lecture classrooms, three demonstration labs and a spacious amphitheater, where the school plans to hold leisure cooking courses for the public in the future, Ruffolo said.

On the grounds of the culinary institute are newly planted, raised beds of herbs. There will be a mature fruit orchard in the years to come, as well as a greenhouse for vegetables, he said.

Future plans also call for a separate baking and pastry building, he said.

"Baking and pastry are such a popular trend right now," Ruffolo said.

The new separate facility would be a place where students can "learn how to mass produce," an art that's necessary for catered events, he said.

The Louisiana Culinary Institute is "going to be the premier culinary school of the South," Ruffolo said.

Chefinstructor Mike Dunn, who has been with the school five years, has worked as executive chef in Baton Rouge at Avoayelles Café, Baton Rouge Country Club and Delaronde Hall, among others.

"I have a lot of experience, and I pass on that knowledge and not just what's in the book," Dunn said.

Dunn said that he and fellow chef instructor Mahon are just finishing the current session of Kitchen Lab 3, "the first time (the students) are able to go into the kitchen."

They began with basics about the kitchen equipment — such as how to light a fryer. "Now they're starting to put food together and put it out," Dunn said.

The students, he said, are doing well.

Just after lunchtime on a Monday in early May, students wearing white chef's coats and black pants were clearing away the complementary noontime meal that first-year students cook daily for the faculty and other students.

For that week, the daily entree choices were stuffed tilapia, grilled pork chops or lasagna, each served with rice pilaf and parsley potatoes. Appetizers, salad, soup and pizza were also on the menu.

Two of the tables in the dining hall are regularly covered with tablecloths and are where faculty members sit and are served lunch by the students, Ruffolo said.

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“Protein is at 6 o’clock,” said Ruffolo, describing the way the meal and the dinner plate must be presented—from the left of the guest.

With a new class of students coming on board in August, the school’s enrollment will be close to 120, the full capacity of the school. It currently has a 15:1 student/teacher ratio in the demonstration labs, he said.

About a third of the students are from out of state, Ruffolo said. The majority of those students find out about the school on the Internet.

“That’s pretty much our No. 1 marketing tool,” Ruffolo said.

Out-of-state students are from Michigan, New York, Texas, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida, he said.

“Louisiana really is a melting pot of different types of culinary experiences, he said, and boasts its own “French Creole flair.”

“There’s definitely an advantage of coming to a culinary school in Louisiana,” Ruffolo said.

He said that in the six years the school has been operating it has a track record of “close to 90 percent” of students finding the program being able to find a job in their field.

One of the first steps for many of the students completing their 16-month culinary education is a “stage,” which is “like a tryout, an evaluation” over several days at Commander’s Palace restaurant in New Orleans, Ruffolo said.

Student Samatha Neal, 19, of Gonzales, said it was her home economics class at East Ascension High School that got her interested in a culinary career.

Jessica Vo, 20, of Lafayette, said she grew up in a large family, with eight siblings, and has often helped her mother cook family dinners.

“I would really like to be a personal chef and cook for different families,” Vo said.

She’d like to help families have the same kind of home-dining experience she did growing up.

Brant Palazzo, 18, of Plaquemine, said he likes the atmosphere of the school.

“Everyone feels really supported. Everyone wants everyone to succeed,” Palazzo said.

The three students are among several from the culinary institute who were to be participating in last week’s New Orleans Wine and Food Experience where they assisted renowned chefs, Ruffolo said.

Rush, who serves as chief executive officer, founded the school to solve a problem.

His younger brother was in the middle of a culinary program at a different school in Baton Rouge, the Culinary Institute of Louisiana, when it closed, he said.

After talking with others in the food industry, Rush, 57, decided to open the Louisiana Culinary Institute on Essen in the former location of Drake’s restaurant.

“The other facility was a retrofitted restaurant and had limitations, as far as an education facility,” Rush said.

“This facility is more related to a school versus a restaurant,” he said, adding that the kitchen labs and other settings are designed to mimic a commercial restaurant setting.

Rush, whose business partnership in the health-care field, Provider Options Holdings, owned long-term acute-care and psychiatric hospitals, said he figures the principles of administering hospitals—with high demands for the right personnel, high standards and strict regulation—can be applied to an educational setting.

He said he continues to learn new things, though.

He visited one of the kitchens recently and a student asked him, “Mr. Keith, what’s better than cake?”

The answer: fried cake.