DOWN HOME COOKING

CHEF PAUL PRUDHOMME IS THE NEW INGREDIENT IN USL'S RESTAURANT ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM

As everyone knows by now, one of the people most responsible for the explosion of Cajun popularity is Paul Prudhomme, famed chef of blackened redfish notoriety, among other dishes. Like all good cooks, he would like for everyone to experience the taste sensation of this area's vast culinary repertoire, and he's done his part. But difficult as it is to believe, there are still some less than fortunate folks who do not know the secrets of a good roux, or even what filet can do for the palate. Well, now Prudhomme gets the chance to show the experts what it's all about, and in his own backyard, so to speak. He has been named an adjunct professor of restaurant administration at USL, and will conduct cooking schools there for noted chefs from around the world. This is definitely a feather in USL's cap. And Prudhomme is excited about it. He's always been interested in sharing the flavor of his roots with others, and now he has the opportunity to do it here in Lafayette.

"I want to show them that it's real, and created by real people," he says. "Besides Acadia being the love of my life, I feel the best culinary program in the world belongs there."

Prudhomme's association with the USL restaurant association program is a real coup for the school. The program has been in existence for four decades, but is still relatively small. A chef of Prudhomme's reputation is the drawing card needed to attract national attention, says Linda Vincent, director of the restaurant administration program.

"I really feel like with his endorsement and support of the program, we will become nationally recognized," she says. "We'll be known across the U.S."

The seminars will last several days, and will include lectures and demonstrations by Prudhomme as well as other area chefs. Students in the restaurant administration program will participate and assist in the sessions. The first one is scheduled for next spring.

Another significant feature of the course is the publicity it will generate for area products and natural resources. Prudhomme hopes to teach the basics of Cajun cooking, beginning from the ground up, and it's important to him to be able to show the role that products indigenous to this area play in his approach to cooking.

"My fantasy has always been to have a cooking school to turn out people who love to cook, but also who have the knowledge of raw ingredients," Prudhomme says. He would like to instill an appreciation in his seminars for the importance of fresh food and produce. He speaks of the way things were done when he learned to cook as he was growing up. Some people will remember those days, for instance wasn't picked up at the grocery store, but was raised at home and killed just before it was put into the stew or dish of the day.

One of the lures that attracted Prudhomme to USL is the prospect of being involved with the Vermilionville project. The university has signed a letter of intent with the Bayou Vermilion District, Vincent says, which would make the Restaurant Administration School part of the management of the restaurant there.

The success of a first-class restaurant is considered crucial to the overall success of the entire historical theme park devoted to Cajun and Creole cultures. With this agreement, the restaurant would be operated as a training center for USL students. Prudhomme is anxious to become involved in this aspect to further his interest in native foods and resources.

Tentative plans for the cooking school at USL call for one seminar each semester, and Prudhomme envisions it to be a continually growing effort. The first one will be for corporate chefs from around the country, and he has plans to expand to include international chefs and eventually put on one of the ultimate food shows in the nation.

"I'm hoping we can incorporate things each year and grow from that. I hope to be of help with their everyday program."

He's not worried about recruiting chefs to the classes. Prudhomme says he's always running into professionals in his business who want to learn more about the food and culture of this area. "I feel like we won't have a lot of problem filling it."

Another benefit is that the funds derived from the program are designated for the restaurant administration program at USL. This major course of study has seen steady growth in the past three years at USL, with the number of students increasing from only a handful a few years ago to the current total of 42.

It's an area of particular relevance here in Acadiana. The area has some of the best cooks in the world right now, Vincent says, but they have been lacking in formal training and management backgrounds.

She is seeking to remedy this, with particular emphasis on management in the restaurant administration curriculum. The program trains people to best serve the food industry needs, and Vincent says this will be of prime importance in the 21st century, when predictions are that the service occupations will have the greatest number of openings.

Vincent gives much of the credit for the program's success to an industry advisory committee, composed of volunteer representatives from the food service industries in Acadiana. She says they have been instrumental in evaluating the curriculum, funding scholarships, and giving advice in a number of other areas. They also become some of the employers of students who graduate in this curriculum from USL. "They have been tremendously supportive," says Vincent.

The impact it will have on the area in general cannot be underestimated. "It will promote all of Louisiana's products," Vincent says. "The area has always been known for our cuisine, and tourism is being built up as a major part of our economy."

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