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Cooks in the kitchen: Schools, classes in South Florida teach the culinary craft

HIGHLIGHTS

There are cooking schools and courses to suit every taste for professionals and novices alike

For professional chefs, the schools can hone skills and provide valuable contacts but costs can be steep

A look at some of the many offerings in South Florida



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BY SIOBHAN MORRISSEY
Special to the Miami Herald

Whether you aspire to be a professional chef or are as Julia Child would say a “servantless American cook,” there are enough courses and classes available in South Florida to suit just about every palate.

A notable food destination, South Florida provides a wide-range of training sites, from expensive career-building college programs to relatively inexpensive classes at the local supermarket. The robust local culinary community attracts famous chefs from around the country who teach the thousands of students who annually sign up for classes, be they amateurs or up-and-coming professionals.

Popular cooking shows such as *Top Chef*, *Hell’s Kitchen* and *Chopped* pull back the curtain on what it is like to work in a commercial kitchen and have led to the era of the celebrity chef. Reality TV aside, the reality is that for every chef who makes it to the top of the food chain, there are scores who toil in obscurity.

The good news, according to Johnson & Wales University Dean Bruce Ozga, is “You’ll always have a job and you’ll never go hungry.” Dean Collen Engle at the Miami Culinary Institute of Miami Dade College, estimates that currently there are 10 job openings for every person entering the hospitality industry, which includes restaurants, hotels and cruise ships, as well as private chefs and big public personas that eventually make a name for themselves on television. While it’s fine to dream, Engle warns, few people make it to the top.

ADVERTISING



“It’s like a triangle,” Engle says of the business. “There are a lot of jobs at the base.” The pay is commensurate with the position. While the median pay for chefs and head cooks, according to the latest figures supplied by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is \$41,610 a year, cooks make roughly half that at \$21,120 annually.

Additionally, it may cost a lot in time and money to put on a professional apron. For those who enter the profession straight out of high school, luck and lots of labor are the key to advancement. On the other hand, culinary schools provide intense skills training and pathways to other professionals and potential jobs. Those schools also cost tens of thousands of dollars for a diploma.

Florida International University offers a 10-week program geared to help people decide whether they want to embark on a cooking career before they invest in a culinary school education. The FIU Culinary Arts Certificate Program costs \$1,950 and is spread out over 10 Saturdays, says Lazaro Gonzalez, a marketing and branding strategist for the university.

Two chefs overseeing an Aprons cooking class at the Publix in Plantation earlier this month illustrate how it is possible to go to a culinary school or learn from the “school of hard knocks” and still end up at the same place.

John Beckett, 36, started out making salads for the perpetually tan actor, George Hamilton. Since then he has racked up nearly 20 years in the business, opening the Beach House Hotel in Bal Harbour and then moving with the food and beverage director to the Palms Hotel in South Beach. From there he joined Publix.

“I was this close to going to Johnson & Wales,” Beckett says. Aside from the cost, he says, he came to a realization about himself. “It’s really about how you invest in yourself — your skills, your talent, your work ethic. Things like that can overcome [a lack of] education sometimes.”

Along with Ken Schuh, he helped teach a class of everyday cooking enthusiasts how to prepare fish, from tilapia in parchment and grouper tacos to cedar plank salmon and seared tuna. Both Beckett and Schuh are *sous-chefs de cuisine*, which is French for under-chef of the kitchen and means they are second in command, just below resident chef Wes Bonner.

Schuh, 49, has nearly three decades in the kitchen and is a Johnson & Wales graduate.

“I do the same stuff that John does,” he says. “However, I think I learned it a little quicker than he would. It took him over the course of 20 years to learn probably what I learned in two years in culinary school.”

His culinary degree helped him land a government job, Schuh maintains, explaining that he went to work for the State Department and was there during the Clinton administration. He worked under then-Secretaries of State Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright.

Even before he went to culinary school, Schuh says, he worked for the politically powerful. “I cooked for vice presidents; I cooked for presidents,” he says, explaining that he cooked for Ridgewells Catering, which was hired for President George H.W. Bush’s 1988 inauguration.

“We did salmon *en croute* (which is salmon embedded in a flaky pastry crust),” he says. “I don’t know if Bush actually sat down and ate the meal, but Chuck Norris did. I served him. Things were a lot more lax back then. When they did the security check, they just sent us outside and we sat on the sidewalk while we were waiting for the dogs to come out and for them to say it was cool to go back inside.”

When asked why — after cooking for the president and Chuck Norris, TV’s most famous Texas Ranger — he would opt to go to culinary school, Schuh responds: “Because I wanted to learn things professionally, how to cook things the correct way.” He turns to Beckett and says, “You were fortunate in that you had someone take you under his wing and guide you in the right direction, instead of ‘Here’s a bag of potatoes. Peel it. Here kid, learn it.’”

Although pleased with the opportunities culinary school provided, Schuh noted that the real drawback is the cost.

“In hindsight, from a monetary point of view,” he says, “I’m still paying for my student loans 20 years later. So, it’s been a struggle.”

His current boss, Wes Bonner, maintains it is possible to combine work and school.

“I always tell young aspiring chefs that a lot of times, if they’ll work very hard and get in with a really good company, a lot of times the companies will sponsor some of your education.”

He should know. After graduating from Johnson & Wales, the firm that hired him paid for his education at Thames Valley University.

“I was working for the Mandarin Oriental in London,” Bonner says, “And they paid for me to go to pastry school for a year and a half while I was over there.”

CULINARY SCHOOLS

JOHNSON & WALES UNIVERSITY

Founded: The school opened in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1914. The North Miami campus opened in 1992.

Dean of Culinary Education, North Miami: Bruce Ozga. He previously held the same position at JWU’s Denver campus. Ozga is a certified executive chef, culinary educator and hospitality educator, and holds associate and bachelor degrees from Johnson & Wales, as well as a Masters in Education from Colorado State University.

Campuses: Four locations: Providence, Rhode Island (main campus); North Miami; Denver; and Charlotte, North Carolina.

International programs: France (with Chef Alain Ducasse); Italy (studies in Florence, with a culinary tour of Sicily); Singapore (regional Asian cuisine in Bangkok); Germany (Koblenz and a tour of the Germany-France wine region); Peru (Lima and the ancient cities of Cuzco and Machu Picchu).

Address: North Miami campus: 1701 NE 127th St.

Enrollment: 850 students are currently enrolled in North Miami’s culinary arts and the bakery and pastry programs, in both the associate and bachelor degree programs.

Celebrity chefs: In addition to celebrity graduates, such as Michelle Bernstein and Adrienne Calvo, JWU also attracts a wide range of visiting chefs. Past visitors include Emeril Lagasse (an alumnus of the JWU Providence campus), *Top Chef* judge Tom Colicchio and *Kitchen Confidential*’s Anthony Bourdain. Even Julia Child stopped by one day, just to say hello.

Faculty: 25 full-time chef instructors

Facilities: 17 labs, including hot kitchens, a beverage lab, a baking lab and pastry shop

Cost: Annual tuition is roughly \$30,000. Half the students live on campus. Room and board can raise the price to more than \$43,000. Financial aid packages are available. Scholarships are granted in the amount of \$21 million.

Contact: 866-598-3567; www.jwu.edu

MIAMI CULINARY INSTITUTE

Founded: 2011.

Department chairman: Collen Engle. In addition to his certifications as an executive chef, culinary educator and hospitality educator, Engle has an MBA from Boston University, and a master of science in human nutrition from the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut. Before joining MCI, Engle owned a restaurant in Louisville, Kentucky, and was a cook for the U.S. Olympic team during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

Location: Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus, 415 NE Second Ave., Miami

Enrollment: Approximately 200 students for the spring term, with some 500 Miami Dade College students who declared culinary arts as their area of study.

New Students: While college enrollment is down for most schools (because of the availability of more jobs), MCI has seen a 5 percent increase in enrollment over past year.

Faculty: Two full-time professors and 15 adjunct instructors.

Facilities: Six training kitchens, otherwise known as “culinary labs,” with two cooking kitchens on both the fourth and sixth floors, and a baking and pastry lab on the fifth floor. These kitchens each accommodate 16 students. So, at any given time, 96 students can have a hands-on experience in the kitchen. The third floor includes the MCI Food and Wine Theater with its demonstration kitchen that features two rows of seating and sinks, and a centralized kitchen with wide-screen TVs that provide close-up views of the chef’s knife skills. Acclaimed restaurateur Michelle Bernstein films her cooking show *SoFlo Taste* in that demonstration kitchen. Cookbook authors also use this demonstration kitchen during the Miami Book Fair. Celebrity chefs who presented demonstrations from their cookbooks include: Nathalie Dupree (known for downhome Southern cooking and her prolific public television appearances); Ana Sofia Peláez (award-winning author of *The Cuban Table* and the great-niece of avant-garde painter Amelia Peláez del Casal); and Brian Boitano (Olympic gold medalist in men’s figure skating).

Features: A half-acre organic garden located a block from the school. Exposure to numerous celebrity chefs, including Ferran Adrià, who is credited with inventing molecular gastronomy and the chefs from the No. 1-rated restaurant in the world, El Celler de Can Roca of Spain.

Cost: Total cost for an associate in science degree: \$26,500.

Contact: 305-237-3276; www.miamidadeculinary.com

LE CORDON BLEU NORTH AMERICA

Founded: 2003, under a licensing agreement between Career Education Corporation and Le Cordon Bleu in Paris.

Projected closure date: September 2017

President and CEO: Todd Nelson heads Career Education Corporation, which operates Le Cordon Bleu North America.

Location: 16 locations, including 3221 Enterprise Way, Miramar.

Hours of operation: Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Course offerings: The Miramar campus offers 12-month diplomas in the culinary arts, and pastry and baking programs, as well as 21-month associate degrees in the culinary arts, and the pastry and baking programs.

Graduation rate: According to the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges 2015 Annual Report, the Miramar campus had a 100 percent graduation rate for the Culinary Arts Associates Program with a class start of Sept. 1, 2011 through Aug. 31, 2012. Only one student was in that program. There were 214 students in the Culinary Arts Diploma program that had a class start date of Oct. 1, 2012 through Sept. 30, 2013. Of those, 79 percent went on to graduate. During that same period, 32 students were enrolled in the pastry and baking diploma program, and 63 percent were graduated.

Employment rate: The lone student in the Culinary Arts Associates program obtained a job. Of the 167 graduates of the Culinary Arts diploma program who were available for work, 83 percent found jobs. Of the 19 graduates of the pastry and baking diploma program, 68 percent found work.

Cost: In Miramar, the diploma program is only open to Florida residents and costs \$19,550. The associate degrees cost \$40,050 for residents and \$42,550 for out-of-state students.

Contact: 954-628-4000; www.chefs.edu.

COOKING CLASSES

The Wok Star

Founded: 1990 (Wok Star brand started in 2009)

Owner: Wok Star Eleanor Hoh

Employees: Hoh is a one-woman operation, but at least one assistant helps with preparation and clean-up during her classes.

Venues: Three:

ALNO, 3650 North Miami Ave., Miami (a kitchen design showroom)

Zonin USA, 8101 Biscayne Blvd., Suite 708, Miami (an Italian wine company's Miami headquarters and penthouse loft)

The newest opened this month:

Boffi Studio Miami, 3800 NE Second Ave., Miami (a kitchen design showroom)

Type of classes: Stir-fry meals from appetizers to entrees; from vegetables to meat, fish and shellfish, all accompanied with a choice of fine wine or designer bottled water. In addition to classes for the home cook, Hoh also provides team-building cooking competitions for corporations, having recently completed one for Dior and expanded to include marketing events for financial investment companies such as Morgan Stanley.

Class size: Maximum of 12

Feature: The Wok Star provides not only instructions on how to cook with a wok, but also the opportunity to purchase the same equipment she uses in class, including a wok and seasonings, special magnetized potholders, a chopping knife and a portable butane burner

Cost: \$85 per three-hour class; \$216 for the Wok Star bundle, which includes a wok kit, stove, chef's knife and seasonings. (Prices subject to change.)

Contact: www.eleanorhoh.com

BILTMORE CULINARY ACADEMY

Founded: 2009

Manager: Katherine Cardoso books the classes, registers the students, teaches the students culinary camp and coordinates all of the events at the academy.

Location: The Biltmore Hotel, 1200 Anastasia Ave., Coral Gables.

Class offerings: The class offerings are varied, including those for adults, children, hotel guests and members of the local community, a kids cooking camp during the summer, and an intense three-day culinary boot camp. They are all hands-on classes.

Class size: Each regular class has eight to 12 students. The three-day boot camp courses cater to a maximum of eight students. Team-building sessions can accommodate 20 participants.

Instructors: Chefs from the hotel's restaurants, as well as two outside chefs, both of whom were trained at Johnson & Wales University. One of the outside chefs is Jeannette Stefan-Ozga, whose husband is JWU Dean Bruce Ozga.

Facilities: The stainless steel kitchen is for the academy's exclusive use. The walls are painted with chalkboard paint and are used as a chalkboard. "Everyone when they come here says, 'Oh, I wish my kitchen looked like this,'" says manager Katherine Cardozo.

Hours of operation: Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Cost: Scheduled classes that run three hours are \$114 per person. The boot camp costs \$450 per person. Private classes vary in price, depending upon the menu and the number of people attending.

Contact: 855-969-2891; www.biltmorehotel.com/bca/index.php

PUBLIX APRONS COOKING SCHOOL

Founded: 2010 in Plantation, 15 years ago chain-wide

Resident chef in Plantation: Wes Bonner

Venues: Nine. Alpharetta, Georgia, and the remainder in Florida: Boca Raton, Jacksonville, Lakeland, Orlando, Plantation, Sarasota, Tallahassee and Tampa. Location in Plantation: 1181 University Dr.

Number of classes: Six classes or more a week are offered, Monday through Saturday. Private classes available on Sunday for team building, birthday parties, bridal showers, birthdays, etc.

Class size: Hands-on classes accommodate 12-14 students. The demonstrations accommodate 48-52.

Type of classes: Both demonstration classes (where the chef cooks, and the attendees enjoy the meal with wine) and hands-on classes (where attendees learn by doing and then relax with the meal and wine afterward) are available. The program includes classes taught by celebrity chefs, master chefs, wine pairing experts, as well as classes geared toward improving cooking techniques, special occasions, kids aged 8 through 12, and teens aged 13 through 18.

Celebrity chefs: The roster of celebrity chefs constantly changes, but the school has hosted several, including Rachel Ray; *Top Chef* judge Tom Colicchio; *Top Chef* contestants Kevin Gillespie, Howie Kleinberg and Fabio Viviani; Aarón Sánchez from the Food Network's *Chopped* and the Cooking Channel's *Taco Trip*, as well as two Spanish-language TV series on FOX Life; and former White House executive pastry chef Roland Mesnier.

Feature: Receive a 20 percent discount on housewares for the same date as the class you attend.

Cost: Typical classes range from \$40 to \$50 per person. Costs can increase to \$60 if it is a champagne pairing or includes a celebrity.

Contact: 954-577-7632; www.publix.com.

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