



# West Valley VIEW

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## Fine dining at a fine price

*College restaurant offers experience for students, gourmet food for public*

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When eating at an upscale, gourmet restaurant, \$8.95 might get you a bowl of soup, if you're lucky.

At Regions Restaurant in Avondale, it gets you a three-course meal.

"The food is excellent," Litchfield Park resident Carol Cooper said. "It's good no matter what you get."

Cooper has been dining at Regions Restaurant - located on the southwest end of campus at Estrella Mountain Community College, 3000 N. Dysart Road - since it opened in 2004.

STUDENTS MACIE GAITHER, right, and Caroline Nodes prepare a raspberry sauce for a dessert at Regions Restaurant Sept. 4 at Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale. The campus restaurant serves three-course lunches.

So, too, have Ray and Barbara Miller of the PebbleCreek retirement community in Goodyear.

"If you eat here one time, you'll understand why," Ray said. "You can't beat the price or the food you get."

Sounds too good to be true, right?

Well, there are a few catches, the restaurant is only open from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Thursday and Friday, and seating is by reservation only at 623-935-8396. The food is prepared by the college's culinary students, as well.

### White House connections

On this particular Thursday, the kitchen was under the direction of EMCC instructor Jon Hill, an executive chef of more than 30 years for such notable places as the Wigwam Resort in Litchfield Park and the White House. Yes, the White House. Hill prepared breakfast, lunch and dinner for President Reagan in his final two years of office, 1987-88.

Hill was recruited by the Avondale college to start the culinary program in 2002. After running the entire program for a few years, he asked to be a full-time instructor so he could spend more time with his family.

Hill was instructing the American Regional Cuisine class Sept. 4 when the students prepared a three-course meal that included choice of smoked corn chowder or a salad featuring artichoke hearts, cherry tomatoes and oyster mushrooms. For the entree, customers chose either piki pouches or Atlantic salmon fillet. For dessert, everyone got crepes Hopi style.

"A customer said those were the best crepes they ever had," Hill said an hour after the restaurant closed. "The students made them from scratch. Compliments such as that fuel the students."

### Valuable experience

Hill has the expertise and passion to do the same.

"I've found I'm able to occasionally inspire a student to go into the culinary program," Hill said.

What Hill provides for the students is that "been there, done that" experience. Plus, after opening up several resorts across the nation in his time, Hill knows exactly what employers are looking for in chefs.

"We are teaching skill sets that they need in the industry," Hill said.

And by having Regions Restaurant, the students get "a snapshot" of how it is on the outside, he said.

"[Hill] has a lot of knowledge," said Matthew Horn, one of the 12 students who prepared the three-course meal Sept. 4. "He has done a lot in his career."

Student Macie Gaither wants to do a lot with her associate's degree in culinary after she graduates.

The 34-year-old Goodyear resident and mother of five wants to open a Southern Cajun restaurant in the West Valley.

"I'm from the South, and Southern people love to cook," Gaither said, recalling that she was the official "taster" for both her grandmothers.

On Sept. 4, Gaither was responsible for keeping the hot order line moving and assisted with the crepes.

The kitchen's "baby," 17-year-old Luis Cortez, was the soup chef Sept. 4. That was a step up from just making potatoes, which he did in culinary class at Goodyear's Estrella Foothills High School, where he graduated in May.

"I was just cooking potatoes, but I liked it; I was still motivated," Cortez said. "I just want to cook."

### **Reserve your seats today**

While Sept. 4 was American regional, Sept. 5 featured gourmet foods. That will be the lineup through mid-October, Thursday American, Friday gourmet. Then mid-October through December, the restaurant will feature international foods on Thursday and catering, displayed like a buffet, on Friday.

"Even their buffets are outstanding," Ray said. "I have my calendar marked for months."

Reservations do fill up in a hurry, more so during the spring semester, culinary program director Steve Griffiths said. He noted that usually by mid-February, the restaurant is booked through May.

Griffiths said the average culinary class size is 13, and they run accelerated eight-week courses.

"They retain a lot more that way," Griffiths said.

The director said enrollment has increased by 35 percent over the past two years, which he credits in part to listening to the high school instructors about what students want.

While the six-year program is "still a work in progress," Griffiths said, "We continue to improve the facilities and offer the best education possible for the student."

And Regions Restaurant offers the best deal in town.

"You never have anything bad here," Ray said. "Plus it's a nice place to bring a small group."

Local residents are not the only ones filling up the restaurant, either, as plenty of college faculty dine at the student-operated facility.

"It's so good," said Kathy Whitney, the administrative secretary for science and math. "The west side needs more things that are not chains."

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