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Avondale Regions Restaurant builds career hopes, draws raves

Food is cooked by EMCC culinary students

by **David Madrid** - Sept. 14, 2011 07:59 AM
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At Regions Restaurant in Avondale, the price of a good [meal](#) can't be beat.

That sentiment comes from a table of eight customers from as far away as Yarnell, Tempe and Wickenburg and as close as Goodyear.

They rave about a three-course meal that costs \$8.95, plus tax.

[Inside Regions Restaurant](#)

"This is an outstanding place to eat," said Goodyear resident Ray Miller, who with his wife, Barbara, has come to the restaurant once or twice a week for about seven years.

The food is cooked by a staff made up of Estrella Mountain Community College Culinary Studies students who work in a bustling full-scale kitchen.

They are future chefs, restaurant managers and perhaps even ice carvers.

Regions is a college-operated restaurant open during school where students learn to present their culinary talents to willing buyers. The program provides students with the skills, creativity and confidence needed for careers in professional kitchens and in the food and [beverage](#) industry.

Students work with varied American and international cuisines. They bake and learn the pastry arts.

On Friday, about 35 customers dined on a buffet menu that included soup du jour, marinated grilled vegetables, Greek salad, sliced fruit, cheese tortellini with sun-dried tomato cream sauce, chef-carved roasted sirloin of beef au jus and various [desserts](#).

Steve Griffiths, 40, program director for the Culinary Studies program, said the college offers a two-year associate's degree as well as a baking and pastry certificate.

Students learn culinary arts that include theory and hospitality courses, as well as more than 500 hours of lab work in a fully equipped kitchen.

Griffiths said the Culinary Studies program provides students with a road map to the food-service business, whether they choose hotels and resorts or catering or to become a beverage director or a restaurant manager. Tuition is \$7,500 for the two-year program.

"They will get a taste of everything in the program and have the ability to make a decision of where they want to take it after graduation," Griffiths said.

Many students go directly to work from the program, and some already work in the food-service industry and are moving up the career ladder, he said.

The program has a transfer agreement with Northern Arizona University to move students into a bachelor's program in hotel and restaurant management.

Students can earn 75 credits at EMCC of the 125 credits needed for a bachelor's degree, Griffiths said.

The students are a diverse population.

"We have a wide range of students who come here from all walks of life," he said. "We have the traditional high school student as well as the recession-based person who lost a job and needs retraining."

Among the students are Savannah Espinoza, 18, of Goodyear, and Joshua Bailas, 21, of Surprise. The sophomores have wanted to work in the culinary arts since they were children and both want to own a restaurant.

"I really want to travel and just experience the whole culinary world and eventually settle down and run my own restaurant, but that won't be for a few years," Espinoza said.

Bailas said he knew he wanted to cook in middle school.

"After the program, I plan to get into the field, and I also plan to open my own business," Bailas said. "I don't see that happening for another 10 to 15 years, but first I want to work around the industry in different positions to get to know the ins and outs of the various kitchen work."

Both students gave the Culinary Studies program a 4.5 rating out of 5. Both said perfection is hard to attain, thus their reluctance to give the program a perfect rating.

Although perfection may be tough to attain, the food at Regions Restaurant is perfect enough for Jane and Joe Sanderson, ages 66 and 70.

The Sandersons live in Yarnell and plan to drive five times this semester to eat with the Millers and their friends from Tempe, Marian and Roy Hoyt, ages 74 and 70. Next semester, they will make new plans to meet and eat at the restaurant.

"The price is right for a wonderful meal," Jane said. "This is great food, and this is a great group of kids."

Marian added, "We've never had anything (to eat) we didn't like here."





Ray Miller said that there is another reason to love the restaurant: There hasn't been a price increase in about five years.

"Just consider a three-course meal for that kind of money," he said. "We're all seniors. We're on fixed incomes."

The Millers said they have made their reservations for the semester because the restaurant can become crowded and they don't want to lose their weekly spot.

In addition to the food, students wheeled out a 3-foot-tall ice sculpture of a swan.

In addition to his experience as a chef, Griffiths has won ice-sculpting honors.

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