

West Valley VIEW

The community newspaper of Avondale, Buckeye, Goodyear, Litchfield Park & Tolleson, AZ ❖ Phone (623) 535-8439

Tuesday, February 22, 2011

Regions serves up a bite of reality

Students learn, while food-lovers dine

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Imagine if a three-course meal provided not only a full stomach, but a well-rounded culinary education as well.

That's the reality at Estrella Mountain Community College, though the reality is a bit different from what's seen on reality television, students say.

"Growing up cooking was not something we really thought about or did," 30-year-old Natalie Johnson said. "My mom's a terrible cook, but Food Network inspired me."

Of course, it's not exactly like what you see on TV, the Goodyear woman said. "The tests are timed, and that's a real stress. If your cake is still in the oven, you're S.O.L."

Johnson was an English teacher for 4.5 years before enrolling in EMCC's culinary arts program about a year ago.

The program offers about 10 to 14 class sections per semester, and sees about 14 to 18 students in each of its classes.

Nineteen-year-old Jose Jacobo of Goodyear is also part of the group.

"To tell you the truth, I became interested in culinary studies because of the Food Network," he said. "I always liked the way they cook - they always made it seem like an art form. It's not always like that, but I really love this now."

The two not only have Food Network in common, but they also both work at Regions Restaurant as part of their culinary education experience.

Cooking to the next level

Regions, a student-operated eatery that serves American regional and international selections, just re-opened on campus for the semester about a month ago.

There, guests can receive a three-course meal for \$8.95. A sample lunch might include a bowl of corn chowder,



STUDENT CHEF ESMERELDA VALENZUELA serves soup to Carol Paulsen of Goodyear at Regions, the student-operated restaurant on the Estrella Mountain Community College campus in Avondale. Valenzuela, Alan Garbe, Mike Twiss and Mark Heimkes were serving the starter course — Milan country soup and a tossed Greek salad. View photos by Ray Thomas

beef tenderloin Wellington with spicy pizzaioli tomato sauce, and strawberry flambé with green peppercorns served over French vanilla ice cream.

The food isn't prepared by master chefs, but rather by EMCC students enrolled in the college's culinary program, which is headed by director and chef Steve Griffiths.

"The goal is to give the students a well-rounded education - not just in one area of culinary arts - so that they are well rounded and have a better chance in the job market," Griffiths said.

Indeed, along with earning an associate's of applied science in culinary studies, one can also obtain a baking and pastry certificate from the program.

The college has also recently struck a deal with Flagstaff-based Northern Arizona University that will allow credits to transfer to NAU's School of Hotel and Restaurant Management.

And if there's any question as to whether or not the student-prepared food at Regions is any good, just ask Lynn Mulhall. She's not only a regular, she's Goodyear's city clerk. She and a group of city staffers eat there every Thursday.

"I have been eating at Regions since they first opened their doors (nine years ago)," Mulhall said. "We all love it. We look forward to our Thursday lunch and experiencing new dishes."

Mulhall described the food as "delicious, perfect-size portions, pretty presentation, and includes quite a variety of choices;" and the wait staff - who are actually the student chefs - as "always courteous and efficient."

As for the price, well, you can't beat it, she said. "Our group loves going there so much that we always pay \$10. The extra dollar is not a tip. The money goes back into the program ... that we all want to see continue at the college."

It's a program that, for Jacobo, has its rewards. "Cooking makes you feel good. Even if someone is having a bad day," he said, "if you give them something good, it makes you smile."

Regions Restaurant is open Thursdays and Fridays for lunch at 3000 N. Dysart Road in Avondale. Reservations are required. For information or to reserve a table, call 623-935-8396, or visit www.estrellamountain.edu/regions.

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