

A Sustainable Kitchen

Seattle Culinary Academy in action for a better environment



PHOTO BY SATOMI UMEHARA

Culinary Arts students Aiyana Kennedy and Sunni Jackson prepare for the "Chef's Express" cafeteria line.

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On Friday afternoon, as the aroma of freshly baked goods filled the area around the pastry case in the atrium, so did a lineup of people.

Students, faculty members, security officers and people in the neighborhood all waited in line, looking intently at a variety of pastries and breads, trying to decide on their pick of the day.

"This is a remarkable hidden bakery," said Betit Morrison, who emerged from the line with four rolls, "There is a well known bakery on Madison. The things I buy here at the school are every bit as good as the ones at that store and half the price."

While she is aware of the secret of Seattle Central—high quality food at affordable prices—she might not have known that the students who make these products are becoming

more conscious about food and its connection to the environment.

The Seattle Culinary Academy of Seattle Central, which offers two programs, Culinary Arts and Specialty Deserts and Breads, has a new focus: sustainability.

The sustainable food movement itself is not new.

Alice Waters, a chef and an educator from Berkeley, California, became a proponent of the sustainable food movement in the 1970s. She emphasized the importance of eating local, organic and seasonal food, and explored the farm-to-table relationship in her books, restaurants and education programs at public schools.

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Eating locally-produced food reduces the need for food transportation, which reduces emissions that cause air pollution and the greenhouse effect — and it's fresher. If the food is in season, it tastes better, has higher nutrition value and takes less energy to produce. And organic farming has less impact on the environment, since it does not pollute soil and water system with synthetic fertilizers and pesticides.

Students and instructors in the culinary programs have been recycling waste and supporting small farmers for a long time, but they have been gearing up their effort for sustainability for the past five years.

In 2001, the program started providing ten scholarships to students for a stay at the Quilliscut Farm School of Domestic Arts, it is a goat dairy farm in Rice, Washington, where culinary professionals and students can learn farm-to-table relationships. Students spend a week there in the summer, experiencing the sustainable lifestyle, as they work at the farm, as well as visiting other farms in the area.

Students have daily chores that begin at 5:30 a.m. and continue into the evening. Some of the work involves milking goats and feeding them and other animals such as chickens, quail and turkeys around the farm.

"We harvested the gardens and made daily group meals with just what they have growing outside," said Kristen Schumacher, a culinary art student who went to Quilliscut Farm last summer, "We milked goats and made cheese with it literally right out of the udders. We ate fresh mozzarella that we made the same day with wonderfully delicious heirloom tomatoes and basil."

One of the important things students learn at the farm is animal husbandry and how to use all the cuts of a butchered animal. A farm owner kills a lamb in the morning; students then cut and dress the animal under the supervision of a chef instructor.

This experience nurtures respect towards animals. Meat will no longer appear as a piece of product on a plastic tray. Schumacher said that she became more appreciative and respectful, because she is able to think about how the animal lived, how it was killed and which part of



Culinary students pluck feathers from ducks at the Quilliscut Farm School.

PHOTO BY ROBERT GAVIN

the body each cut came from.

Students also visit a bee farm and orchards in the area. Schumacher said, "My life changed because of what I learned at that farm," said Schumacher. "I am a better-informed consumer. And I eat, cook, shop, clean and enjoy life differently."

In fall 2005, the Seattle Culinary Academy took a step forward in its effort toward sustainability. It launched a first ever course on the subject of sustainability, called Sustainable Food Systems Practices. "To our knowledge, we are the only culinary school in the western United States to offer a formal course on this subject," said Linda Chauncey, Dean of the Seattle Culinary Academy.

The instructor, Karen Jurgensen, is the Chef Instructor from the Quilliscut Farm School. She teaches professional chefs, culinary students and agricultural professionals farm-to-table practices and philosophy when she is at the farm.

Chiefly second-quarter culinary students have been taking this new

course. This quarter, 54 students are enrolled in the 7a.m. class.

The class covers a wide range of subjects. "We begin with an attempt to define what a sustainable food system might look like," said Jurgensen. She listed some of the topics the class covers: labeling, organics, genetically modified foods, fisheries issues, globalization of the food system, meat issues, water conservation, and waste management.

She said the challenge of the course is that "there is so much to cover, and so little time to convey it." But the feedback from the students has been very positive so far, she said.

Seattle Culinary Academy's effort for sustainability doesn't stop here. This year, farming experience in Skagit Valley will be part of the Culinary Arts summer curriculum. The program has already been promised an acre of farmland in Skagit Valley. Under the current plan, a group of Culinary Arts students will travel to this farmland, tending and harvesting the produce with the support of Skagit Valley farmers. They will also

have a chance to visit produce, poultry, cattle, cheese and shellfish farms in the surrounding area.

Experiencing farming and strengthening the farmer-and-chef connection are essential components of the sustainable food movement.

"It can't just be about the course that we teach, and everything else outside of it remains unchanged. We must integrate the principles of sustainability throughout the curriculum, and make ourselves a greater part of the sustainable community," said Linda Chauncey, Dean of the Seattle Culinary Academy.

The program is now in the process of revising its summer curriculum working out the details with the Skagit Valley farmers.

Those in the Specialty Breads and Desserts program are not expected to be included in this farming experience in Skagit Valley, at least for now. But the changes towards sustainability are obvious in that program as well. Ami Ram, a Specialty Breads and Desserts student said "Recently, we started to use more organic food—organic flour, fruits and vegetables. All the artisan bread we make, we use 100% organic flour now."

A few quarters ago, the program increased the number of recycle bins, said Ram. Students are now required to separate their waste into several different categories such as paper, glass and cans. Compost bins are also used in all the kitchens of the academy. "Organic waste is taken to an off-site facility in Everett, where it is made into usable compost," said Diana Dillard, a Chef Instructor.

"With the composting program, our students can return organic waste back into a natural cycle," said Chauncey, "I think it is very important, not just as a culinary student—but as a citizen of the planet—that they understand their roles in stewardship of the earth."

For those who are interested in learning more about this topic, the academy is working to make the sustainability class open to the entire campus by fall 2006.

Even without taking the class, there are many things that can be done to contribute to sustainability: buying local and seasonal food, reducing, reusing and recycling waste. Eating at the Culinary Arts restaurants or buying things at the pastry case on campus are also a tasty way of contributing to sustainability.

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Animals, including this turkey, goats and chickens, roam freely at the Quilliscut farm.

PHOTO BY ROBERT GAVIN