



Cooking Up A Future

As the Al Pollard Culinary Arts Program rolls out its new facilities, leaders are thinking about its potential impact beyond the kitchen

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GOOD EATS

Latonya Scott, a student in the Al Pollard Culinary Arts Program at Virginia Western Community College, makes ricotta cheese in one of the kitchens at the school.

On any given Wednesday this fall, 16 or so Virginia Western Community College students will step into a brand new building far from their campus, dressed in black-and-white checked pants and tight-fitting, buttoned-up tops.

They'll find a stool at a kitchen station — oven, stove, fridge and sink, laid out in a space no larger than a dining table. They'll set down their rolled aprons and zippered pouches of knives.

They'll listen to a lecture, then complete a cooking assignment, perhaps glancing at the mounted TV screen for detailed instructions.

When they walk into the sunlit hallway outside their classroom, they will likely have no idea how many years, how much energy it took to create their state-of-the-art classroom.

But James Zeisler knows. Program head for the last 11 years, he's been with the Al Pollard Culinary Arts Program, a division of VWCC located in the heart of the Gainsboro neighborhood in Roanoke, since before the beginning.

He understands the work that has gone into making this dream come true — and the impact that \$5 million of stainless steel, glass and brick can have on his students, Roanoke's restaurant community and the region's economic development as a whole.

The potential for this space to host region-wide events will be front and center with the 13th annual Al Pollard Memorial Gala on Sept. 22. For the first time ever, the gala will be held at the culinary program's home, complete with music, judged cooking competitions and food — so much great food.

Zeisler and his fellow culinary instructors can't help but to bask in the possibility of it all. This addition is their chance to put their program, their city, their region on the culinary map.

"It's a beautiful setup," says Zeisler, a trim, mustachioed man. "It's just unbelievable to have watched this transformation."

1. START WITH DRAMATIC GROWTH

THE TALE OF THE CULINARY SCHOOL's beginnings have the feel of folklore.

The year was 2007. Zeisler had been hired to be the program's only full-time faculty. As August rolled around, the building was still under construction, so Virginia Western brought to Roanoke a kitchen fitted into a 53-foot trailer that had once served those displaced by Hurricane Katrina. School officials had expected 50 students to sign up; 89 did. Zeisler taught them all, that first semester, in that mobile kitchen.

From the day the stainless mixing bowls were set on their shelves at the Claude Moore Education Complex on the east side of Gainsboro's famed Henry Street, the school had outgrown its space.

But that didn't slow the program's rise.

With the backing of Virginia Western's leaders, more instructors were added. A

second full-time instructor. Then a third — pastry chef John Schopp. Class offerings grew to include baking, cake decorating and catering.

In 2010, Zeisler took charge of a fading local chapter of the American Culinary Federation. The largest professional organization of chefs in North America, comprised of 15,000 members in more than 150 chapters, it's a leader in culinary certification, accreditation and competitions. Connecting the school to the ACF gave it national recognition, curriculum resources and the potential for bragging rights.

Even with only one classroom and one kitchen, the culinary program brought in adjunct instructors, often leaders in their fields such as Aaron Deal, the James Beard Foundation-nominated chef at Roanoke's The River and Rail.

In 2014, the ACF accredited the culinary arts program, making it one of the earliest community college programs in

the state to have earned that distinction.

Meanwhile everybody kept their eyes peeled for a bigger space.

That opportunity arrived in 2015, when the city sold the second-to-last open parcel in Gainsboro to the Roanoke Higher Education Center Foundation. There was pushback from the African-American community — here was yet another piece of its historic neighborhood being developed in a way that did not commemorate the cultural light that Henry Street had been. An expanded culinary school had nothing to do with jazz or history or African-American culture whatsoever.

But the foundation had secured \$5.5 million in state funding to build an 8,000-square-foot expansion. The city voted yes. The addition would more than double the program's teaching space.

By that time, local chef Ted Polfelt had joined the faculty. Plans called for each of the three faculty chefs to design his own kitchen. For pastry chef Schopp, a baking



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MADE FROM SCRATCH Chef Jim Zeisler, instructor for the Al Pollard Culinary Arts Program at Virginia Western Community College, teaches students how to make lasagna noodles.



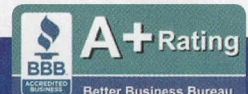
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kitchen. For Polfelt, a sleek European-style room with flat cook tops concentrated in a central island. For Zeisler, a space with 20 independent cooking stations.

The addition also included a walk-in refrigerator large enough for butchering classes to be conducted inside, a deep freezer big enough for several students to stand in and a separate refrigerated space directly connected to a loading dock.

Finally, there would be a wide hallway with doors that opened to the outside, creating space for food trucks or bands or large crowds during cooking contests or demonstrations.

This was more than any of the chefs had dared hope for. In fact, they said, it was an all-out game changer.

2. ADD POSSIBILITIES

SCHOPP AND ZEISLER LEAN BACK from their classroom table, dressed in their white chef jackets. They're discussing their

favorite subject — the culinary school — how it touches so many commercial kitchens in Southwest Virginia and their plans to expand its reach even farther.

"Everybody in this town that cooks," Schopp says, "we're here to raise their level."

In the 2017-18 school year, about 330 students took part in Virginia Western's two-year associate's degree or classes to complete one of the five industry certifications the program offers.

But the ripple effects of those students are so much greater.

"Every restaurant in downtown has a student or a graduate," claims Schopp. He and Zeisler throw out the names of a few of the program's gems. When pressed for more, Schopp puts his hands on his knees, nods his head at Zeisler and begins his list.

"You've got Tom [Sosnowski] at Rockfish. Who's over at the Hotel [Roanoke] right now?"

They keep it going, fingers snapping

when names escape them, knowing they're missing many.

There are graduates at Frankie Rowland's Steakhouse. 419 West. Chateau Morrisette Restaurant. Wildwood Smokehouse. Caribbica Soul. The Omni Homestead Resort. Earth Fare. Rock & Roll Diner. They are in the kitchens at Richfield Living retirement community. The Park — Oak Grove retirement community. Leading food preparation at Carilion Clinic and LewisGale Medical Center.

Schopp takes the cream of the crop for his catering business, Center Stage.

There are, of course, graduates who've gone farther afield. A private chef on a yacht, Walt Disney World Resort in Florida.

"That's the rewarding part of it," says Schopp, "to see them out there, having success."

But cooks in kitchens are only a morsel of the overall effect the culinary program has on the region. There are the tourism dollars that come from Roanoke's restau-



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rants and breweries. And there's city name recognition when the program makes headlines in the larger culinary world. Like when the Southwestern Virginia chapter of the ACF was voted national chapter of the year this year. Or when the program's culinary knowledge bowl team advanced to the national competition at the ACF convention in New Orleans in July.

The chefs have big ideas about where the culinary program might reach next. With more kitchen space, there's the chance for more non-credit community classes.

"We really can let people come in for a day or two and learn how to make bread or soup or sauce," Schopp says.

They have hopes of creating classes and incentives that could attract those already working in the food service industry to hone specific skills and elevate the region's restaurant scene.

There's talk of creating a hospitality certification that could teach those in the hotel industry. Maybe a course or two that would cover restaurant and hotel management skills.

Schopp keeps brainstorming: What about a brewery or winery program? Could the program work to connect restaurants and food entrepreneurs with local farms?

If there's been a weak spot in the curriculum, alums say, it's that the culinary school's training can seem stuck in a classical French time warp. More space to experiment, more time for each student in the kitchen just might help with that.

"The expansion at the culinary school is going to make them more able to teach more kids," says Rockfish head chef and program graduate Tom Sosnowski. "It will be great for the city and for the food industry especially."

3. KEEP AT IT

FIVE CULINARY STUDENTS ARE IN THE SCHOOL'S ORIGINAL KITCHEN, turning eggs and semolina into a tidy lump of dough.

They are halting, nervous. Have they measured correctly? Followed the directions well enough?

"That's all right. It'll come together," encourages Zeisler, in his tall chef's toque. "Keep it coming. Keep it coming."

He's right, of course. As the students run their dough through the whirring white Kitchen Aid mixers, the sheets of pasta get thinner. And their confidence grows.

"Now I'm getting this down to a science," says student Samuel Wellington Kinsey, a 22-year-old fourth-generation butcher enrolled in culinary school to round out his kitchen know-how. "And I have to say, I rather like it."

This is what the Al Pollard Culinary Arts Program teaches — skills, experience, determination.

Even though these students have far to go — they are only in week three of an introductory cooking course — their potential is wide open.

A little like the culinary school itself.

Perhaps Schopp, shaking his longish gray hair for emphasis, puts it best: "This school is something Virginia Western and the state of Virginia should be proud of. And there is no end in sight. We are not slowing down." ★

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