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American Culinary Federation
The Standard of Excellence for Chefs

from classroom to kitchen

It's a big step, but culinary school can help prepare students for the real world. / BY KATHRYN KJARSGAARD

Some chefs are drawn to their future careers at a young age; others blaze a trail to their true calling after high school or during college. While a stint in culinary school isn't a requirement for becoming a successful chef, many choose to attend anyway. Whether they want to hone skills they learned working in restaurants or make a career change, culinary school can set chef hopefuls on track for success.

Most chefs agree that the time and money invested in their culinary education was well spent. They also say that while culinary school provides a great foundation in skills and knowledge, real-world experience—learned on the job in a working kitchen—is a must.

school choices

Matt O'Neill, executive chef at David Burke Kitchen Aspen, slated to open this summer in Aspen, Colo., made a decision to change course and attend culinary school at New England Culinary Institute (NECI) in Montpelier, Vt., after two years in college. "I knew traditional college wasn't for me," says O'Neill. "A friend convinced me to go to culinary school, and within three weeks, I had packed my bags and was headed to school in New England, where another friend was going."

Sabrina Sexton, lead culinary-arts instructor at the Institute of Culinary Education (ICE) in New York, also attended college, with the goal of going to medical school. Then, during her senior year, she realized that she wanted to pursue a career based on what she loved—cooking. She finished her four-year degree, however, and then worked in restaurants before attending ICE, which she chose because it offered a shorter program. "I already had the college experience for four years, so I didn't need a longer program," she says. "I finished in less than a year."

Friends and family encouraged Ariel Bagadiong, executive chef at Freestyle Food + Drink at the Dana Hotel & Spa, Chicago, to attend Kendall College, Chicago. "I always liked cooking and loved food, but I never wanted to be a chef," he says. "I was considering going to school for an engineering degree when friends encouraged me to become a chef."

Bagadiong looked at schools in the Chicago area. He decided that as Kendall College—located at the time in Evanston, Ill.—was only a two-year program, he'd give it a try to see if he liked it. "Needless to say, I fell in love with the industry," he says.

For Derek Biazio, executive chef at Alexander's Steakhouse, Cupertino, Calif., the path to becoming a chef was set during his freshman year at Kingman High School, Kingman, Ariz. That year, the school began offering a food-arts class led by a chef who had attended The Culinary Institute of America (CIA), Hyde Park, N.Y., and worked in high-volume and high-end restaurants. "This class in high school was my introduction to culinary school," Biazio says. "I had a head start compared with others when I got to school."

After high school, Biazio's teacher suggested that he contact chefs and restaurants he respected and talk with them about what they were looking for in new hires. He also asked the chefs which

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
1) Jim Hutchison 2) Chase Wilbanks
3) Derek Biazio 4) Matt O'Neill





culinary schools in the Scottsdale, Ariz., area they recommended. They all directed him to the culinary-arts program at Scottsdale Community College. They recommended that particular program, he says, because it cost less and was a longer, more intense program with a smaller student/teacher ratio.

Louis DiBiccari, chef at Tavern Road, Boston, also chose a school in Scottsdale, Scottsdale Culinary Institute (now, Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Scottsdale). He liked that it was an accelerated program and a French-style culinary school. Also, it was surrounded by good restaurants, and he was able to work at some of them while in school. “I was 21, and had figured out early in life what I wanted to do,” he says. “I had short-term and long-term goals mapped out already.”

Chase Wilbanks, executive chef at Aurum Food & Wine, Steamboat Springs, Colo., started washing dishes in restaurants at age 14. He fell in love with the industry while in high school, and had his sights set on attending the CIA. He applied and was accepted before his senior year.

different approaches

O'Neill says the teaching philosophy at NECI was different from that at larger, big-name culinary schools. Classes were small, with seven or eight people in a group, and groups rotated in and out of focuses every three to six weeks. Students learned about different types of restaurants by working in various hands-on venues on campus.

“During the baking module, we’d wake up at 4 a.m. to go bake bread. We also worked in the fine-dining restaurant, the high-volume restaurant and the butchery,” O'Neill says. “It was hands-on. There was some classroom time, where you learned the business part of it, but we were not focused on classroom time, it was more real-world focused. It was my type of learning, and I was prepared more than most kids coming out of culinary school.”

Bagadiong notes that Kendall College concentrated on teaching classical French techniques, which helped him when he applied those skills in kitchens after graduation. He also spent a semester working in the student-run The Dining Room, half of which he spent in the back of the house and half in the front of the house.

Biazo spent his first semester in core classes. Then, the second and third semesters were focused on kitchen time and hands-on experience in the student restaurant, working both front- and back-of-the-house sections. The last semester was more core classes. “In the end, I had one full year of kitchen time and one year of classroom instruction,” he says. “I also worked full time in other restaurants, so I was going to school full time and working full time.”

The focus of the program at ICE was technical, and students cooked all day, every day, says Sexton. She notes that there was classroom time for six or seven months. “We did hands-on cooking and learning for about five hours a day in classes such as butchering, wine tasting, ethnic cuisines and menu design.” Then, she says, students did externships. “I did mine at Chanterelle in New York, which had just gotten a four-star review.

“The credentials of attending culinary school certainly helped open the doors to work in some great restaurants.” Sexton worked

LEFT TO RIGHT: Louis DiBiccari; Sabrina Sexton



ADVICE FROM THE FRONT LINES

Chefs who attended culinary school and now work in the industry offer insights for those considering the path to take toward a successful career.

Ariel Bagadiong, executive chef at Freestyle Food + Drink at the Dana Hotel & Spa, Chicago, says that someone looking at a possible career in foodservice should first do a stage in a restaurant. "People look at this as glamorous, but don't realize all the prep work that's involved. They should spend a day or two in a real kitchen. It's a tough, tough industry."

To make it in the industry, **Derek Biazio**, executive chef at Alexander's Steakhouse, Cupertino, Calif., says students should work hard, fast and efficiently. "In every job I've ever had, I've tried to execute the vision of the chef I was working for to the highest degree possible. I'd stay late every night and ask if I could help with anything extra. They would show me new things and work extra with me because they saw my drive and passion."

Louis DiBiccari, chef at Tavern Road, Boston, advises culinary students to have humility, respect and ambition. He also recommends working while in school. "Your education comes out in the field," he says. "You need to be applying the knowledge you learn every day, like how to make sauces."

Take advantage of all the learning tools and opportunities while in school, says **Jim Hutchison**, pastry chef at Winvian, Morris, Conn. "You will have a great foundation, but don't expect everything to be given to you when you graduate. There's still a lot of hard work ahead."

Matt O'Neill, executive chef at David Burke Kitchen Aspen, says students should explore what they are getting into and what they want. "I thought I wanted to run a three-star Michelin restaurant, but after working in one, I realized I want a different style of restaurant," he says. "I've toned down my cooking, and it's more rustic and about working with local farmers."

Sabrina Sexton, lead culinary-arts instructor at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York, says, "Don't just jump in without doing research. Spend a week or two in a kitchen and see what that world is like. Get a feel for the energy. You will be on your feet all day, and your hours will be different from those of your friends and family."

Chase Wilbanks, executive chef at Aurum Food & Wine, Steamboat Springs, Colo., worked full time during school. He would tell potential students not to follow his lead, however, but to enjoy school life a little more. "It was a lot of fun," he says, "and I wish I could go back and do it again."

in New York venues that included Gramercy Tavern before joining the faculty at ICE.

DiBiccari's program included 12 months in the classroom followed by a three-month internship. "I'm glad I went, and there are lots of positives, but I wish it had been structured more like real life and more like a boot camp," he says. "A three-month internship is not enough time. It should be at least six months, so the student and the restaurant benefit. I was a bit shell-shocked when I walked into a kitchen after graduating and saw how intense it was."

At the CIA, Wilbanks says he spent most of his time in the classroom, with the last semester spent on restaurant row, working in the front and back of the house in student-run establishments. During the middle of the program, he did an externship that he'd set up for himself in Chicago. "I learned a lot about fine dining during the externship, but the restaurant was slow, so it didn't teach me how it all comes together and how to run a busy kitchen," he says. "At school, it also would have been valuable to get more real-world experience. School is not the same as the pressure in an actual kitchen."

Jim Hutchison, pastry chef at Winvian, Morris, Conn., also attended the CIA, graduating with an associate degree in baking and pastry arts. While he focused on pastry arts, he studied general techniques, products and equipment to help him prepare for future jobs. With that foundation, he was able to enhance his skills and grow quickly in his first pastry-chef position.

most valuable lessons

Bagadiong, who had no restaurant experience, says being exposed to different techniques was the most valuable part of culinary school. He was prepared with the basics of cooking—such as how to julienne and properly measure ingredients—and given the foundation to become a cook. "I was nervous at my first restaurant job," he says, "but a good background from a good culinary school helped to have in the back of my head. When I was told to do a medium dice, I knew how to do it."

While O'Neill thought he knew how to cook coming out of culinary school, when he got to his first job at Daniel in New York, he found that was not the case. His education did prepare him for understanding how a kitchen works and the terminology, however. "It prepared me for what was to come," he says.

He adds that NECI gave him realistic expectations. "They didn't make it seem like it was going to be easy to come out of school and become an executive chef and run a kitchen. They said you would start at the bottom. I think I took the right path, and I'm in a good position now, being 31 years old and about to be running the biggest restaurant in Aspen."

Ariel Bagadiong

While Sexton was an avid home cook before attending culinary school, she realized how much she needed to learn while getting her degree. “Culinary school gives you a solid foundation,” she says. “Studying food is like studying art or music. You need to learn to play scales before you play music. I learned how to organize myself and behave in a kitchen, which can be just as important as learning recipes. I loved school and have fond memories. That’s probably why I am back as an instructor today.”

Biazo says knowing how tough the industry is and that one needs to have speed, execution, passion and drive was helpful to him coming out of school. “I learned that it pays off if you put in your time and pay your dues.”

Hutchison is a strong believer in education, and appreciates the great foundation in technique, food history and philosophy, and product knowledge that he received at the CIA. “When I graduated, I felt confident moving forward in my career,” he says. “The CIA motto is ‘preparation is everything,’ and that has been valuable to me.”

Today, he builds on his education by participating in pastry competitions, such as the Chicago Restaurant Pastry Competition he competed in this year, tying for first place. “Challenging yourself and pushing your boundaries in competitions is a way to build on your education and continue learning throughout your career,” he says.

For Wilbanks, attending culinary school was worth the time and money, and it also gave him a college experience. “It was an important part of my life at that time, even if it was different from a typical college experience,” he says. “I don’t know where my career would be if I had not gone. I think of the restaurants I’ve been able to be a part of and the people I’ve met.”

Some of the most valuable lessons he learned include the importance of discipline, punctuality and being prepared. “Those things can be more important than cooking,” he says. “Having a good attitude, being ready to learn and being on time are critical.” ■

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