

## Oasis students eat in class, and teacher loves it

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Students in the Oasis High School culinary program get to eat the fruits - and vegetables - of their labors. It's the one class in school where no one leaves with an empty stomach. "You've got to have rhythm," instructor and professional chef Jethro Joseph told his students during a recent class. "No one likes a slow chef."

Joseph, who is the executive chef at Tarpon Lodge on Pine Island, pulls double duty during the day. He spends Monday through Friday shaping future chefs and students who just want to learn their way around the kitchen. Oasis Middle School and Oasis High School students are eligible to take the class, and many do.

Oasis Middle School eighth-grade student Joseph Paiz, 13, chops onion for bruschetta. Joseph currently has about 200 students, with another 100 on the waiting list. Students who come into the program start from scratch. "They learn about washing dishes, prepping and proper sanitation," Joseph said. "Then, we move on to soup."

From there, the culinary world opens wide. Midway through a semester Joseph, who graduated from Johnson and Wales in Miami, directs students on dishes like shrimp scampi and bruschetta - but the program is about more than restaurant-quality food. "I show my kids how to eat healthy," Joseph said. "How to have a healthy life."

That means fresh ingredients, no junk food and a minimal amount of frying. Joseph starts the class by talking about a dish and distributing a recipe. He selects several students to be chefs and other kitchen help. Students who are not chosen that day gather around the kitchen counter on barstools and tell Joseph the ingredients on the list. Every student takes on each kitchen role almost every week, and all get to taste the dish of the day at the end of the class.

"I want them to take the recipes home and prepare them for their families," Joseph said. Many do. Eighth-grader student Alondra Lugo, 14, has taken over the kitchen at her house.

"We used to eat out," Lugo said. "Now, we'd rather eat at home. I make what I learn here for my family." Lugo took the class because she wanted to learn her way around the kitchen. Now, she knows how to hold a knife, the importance of sanitized countertops and the best way to squeeze juice out of a lemon.

"We get to see fire, too," she said. "It's not a boring class."

Many of the students are used to a diet of junk food and fast food. Trying new foods is part of the process. Purple cauliflower was new to most palates, and many students were unfamiliar with a wide range of spices. Now, they know cilantro from cinnamon.

Eighth-grader Josh Miller, 13, didn't think he would like the stuffed peppers the class made, but surprised himself when he took his first bite. "They were really good," Miller said. His favorite dishes have been the homemade macaroni and cheese and bruschetta. "I thought the bruschetta smelled really good," he said. "but it tasted amazing."

Miller said that one component of the class that Joseph, known to his students as "Chef J," emphasizes is that the recipes are a guideline, and students should experiment. "We made roast beef sandwiches here and I made them at home," Miller said. "I had a lot of the same ingredients, but different bread. They were really good."

Joseph and Principal Chris Terrill have turned the program into a self-supporting entity. Joseph and his students sell some of their dishes to other students and teachers in the school cafeteria. They use the funds they raise to buy ingredients to keep the program going. Joseph also offers an adult cooking class each Monday evening at the school. Some of his adult students are parents who want a taste of what their children are learning in the classroom.

This is the first year for the program, which launched the first day that Oasis High School opened. "We were looking for a program that would allow our students to gain practical business knowledge," Terrill said. "The program is designed to teach cooking skills, but more importantly, to teach business skills in a real life atmosphere."

Terrill thought the culinary program would be a hit with students, because it married a practical skill and hands-on activity. "The program has worked well with our business curriculum," Terrill said.

"As our school grows, so will this program. Next year we plan on tying one class into a World Studies class. Students will be learning about world cultures in one class and preparing food from the same cultures in another class. Chef Jethro has done a terrific job engaging students and developing our program."

For their final project of the school year students will prepare a four-course meal for their parents, and pull it off in 90 minutes. "It's a lot of pressure," Joseph said. "But they can do it."



Instructor Jethro Joseph shows students Taylor Brooke Henderson, 13 and Alondra Lugo, 14, how to extract lemon juice without getting the seeds in the dish. Chef Joseph's class is one of the most popular in the Oasis program. Joseph maintains a waiting list of students who want to enroll in the class. There's a Monday class for adults. (JL Watson/news-press.com)