

Diverse, Modern and Accessible

BY LEILANI CLARK / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL WOOLSEY & KEN POE | MAY 20, 2016

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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L-R: Robyn Williams, Rian Verdu and Mari Rios

Santa Rosa Junior College Offers an Affordable Culinary Arts Program Fit for Everyone

On a Monday morning in Santa Rosa Junior College's neighborhood, the B. Robert Burdo Culinary Arts Center bustles with students in white chef's coats. Sunshine pours through the skylights and tall windows in the bright and airy 22,000-square-foot facility. Directly across the street from Santa Rosa Junior College, the Center—named in honor of a long-time member of SRJC's board of trustees—is home base for the school's locally renowned culinary arts program.

Walking through the doors of the multi-level brick building, built in 2012, you could easily mistake it for one of those expensive private culinary academies. You know, the ones with a yearly tuition the equivalent of a down payment on a house.

"We spared no expense on equipment, so that students understand this is what it could be and how to use it all," says Chef Jim Cason, department chair and culinary instructor.

Touring the facility, Cason and I peek into a downstairs teaching kitchen where Chef Roger Praplan, co-owner and chef at landmark French restaurant Le Gare in Santa Rosa, is leading a class. One of four teaching kitchens, it's stocked with professional-grade Montague stoves, high-tech hoods and gleaming cutting surfaces.

The considerable investment in the facility is a powerful statement about the SRJC's commitment to this program, especially considering the diversity of the student population. Currently ranging in age from 16 to 70, some students are recent immigrants, learning English for the first time. Others are homeless. Take a class here and you could end up making croissants alongside a retired California Highway Patrol officer, or practicing knife skills next to a vintner who is learning about the culinary side of the wine industry.

"One of our instructors is fond of saying 'We take the top 100% of all students,'" says Cason with a smile. Which is to say that SRJC's culinary arts program is open to anyone and everyone interested in learning how to cook, bake or manage a restaurant.

"Students may be going to work at Safeway or Panera, it doesn't really matter," says Cason. "We teach you at the highest level. If you decide to go to the French Laundry [Thomas Keller's three-Michelin-starred restaurant in Yountville] you understand the culture, the terminology and the techniques those places are looking for."



Photo 1: Oanh "Sally" Nguyen



Photo 2: Joelle McDougall, student

To gain useful insight into how the industry works, students have the opportunity to work at notable local events like Wine Country Weekend and Taste of Sonoma. They can also volunteer to prepare food for a national sommelier event in the fall, held at the Center, and a spring Wine Classic, which serves as a fundraiser for the junior college's culinary, agriculture and hospitality programs.

All of this at a fraction of the cost of many professional culinary school offerings in the U.S. For about \$3,300, SRJC students can get a culinary arts certificate, which certifies that they have been trained in all aspects of culinary arts: stock preparation, soups, sauces, side dishes, garde manger, entrees, bread, pastries and desserts. A baking and pastry certificate runs about \$2,300. Certificates are also available in front house operations, dining room service and restaurant management, all at lower fees. The certificate costs are based on in-state tuition rates, and include all course fees, textbooks and readers, uniform and miscellaneous fees.

While most culinary schools require students to complete outside internships in commercial kitchens, SRJC students hone their skills at Café Rose, the student-run, professional-level restaurant located inside the Center. Currently open to the public Wednesday through Friday, the café features a rotating seasonal menu. In April of this year, the menu featured fresh pappardelle pasta with spring vegetables, red-wine-braised duck leg, crepe cake layered with ham and crème fraîche, and a blackberry and lime puff pastry tart with honey Chantilly cream. Flat-screen monitors in the 60-seat dining room allow diners to watch students prepare their food in the kitchen.

An adjoining bakery serves Bella Rosa Coffee Company's locally roasted, organic and fair-trade coffee and baked goods made by students in a production bakery class. The wine library includes bottles from SRJC's own Shone Farms, a 365-acre organic and sustainable farm nearby in the Russian River appellation. The produce served at Café Rose comes from Shone Farms, as well, and other farms in the area.

"Local" is a buzzword around the culinary arts center. Local purchasing. Local wines. Local farmers' markets. Local food knowledge. It makes sense considering the school lies smack in the middle of Sonoma County, a playground for lovers of food and wine. An advisory committee made up of local chefs, winery and restaurant owners—who give input on the skills they need in employees—helps to shape the curriculum. Cason requires his students to go to farmers' markets, where they meet farmers to learn what's in season and what grows best in Sonoma County.

"Our entire focus is local. We don't want you to graduate here and go someplace else," says Cason. "We provide cooks and winery people for local businesses who are trained in the basic skills and terminology to enter the workforce—here."

Not every student with a certificate pursues a professional culinary career, but a number have gone on to work at the French Laundry, Bouchon Bistro, Madrona Manor and other well-known restaurants and winery kitchens. Betsy Fischer, a 30-year hospitality industry veteran who coordinates the SRJC's culinary career center (as well as serving as front house manager of the café and teaching front house management and wine classes), says she receives calls every day from chefs and restaurant owners looking for trained food workers.

Oanh "Sally" Nguyen, the 28-year-old assistant pastry chef at Kendall- Jackson Winery, is a former SRJC student who benefited from the school's career-focused emphasis. She graduated with a culinary arts certificate in May 2015, and within two months she was hired as an assistant to Kendall-Jackson's award-winning head pastry chef Robert Nieto.

It was a dream come true for Oanh, who immigrated to the United States from Vietnam eight years ago. She'd almost given up on attending culinary school, unable to afford the tuition at the Culinary Institute of America or Le Cordon Bleu. A friend told her about the program in Santa Rosa and Nguyen visited the school in 2013. Impressed by the sparkling new facility, as well as the class selection, she soon enrolled. Without knowing a soul, she moved to Sonoma County, devoting herself to her classes. Her aha moment happened during an introduction to baking class with instructor Shelly Kaldunski. "I totally fell in love with it," she says.



Photo 1: Mary Fok, instructor

Photo 2: Tara Wachtel, PHOTO COURTESY OF RODNEY STRONG VINEYARDS

As a volunteer at food and wine events, Nguyen worked with some of the region's movers and shakers in the food community, including Josh Silvers, Mark Stark and Guy Fieri. She also developed a more refined palate, one attuned to the nuances of local flavors and wines, lifelong connections with her instructors and a solid knowledge of basic culinary skills.

"The school allowed me to believe in myself," she says.

At Kendall-Jackson, Nguyen works long hours, often coordinating the baking schedule when Nieto is traveling to competitions, which he does on a regular basis. From the start, she was confident and prepared.

"I can react quickly to all of the situations at my work," she says. "I am able to turn everything around at the last minute. I can do teamwork. My job is a hard job, it requires a lot of communication, and cooperation between different departments. I was grateful to SRJC because when I went to work I wasn't afraid of not being ready."

Tara Wachtel, winery chef at Rodney Strong Vineyards, also credits her professional success to the preparation she received through SRJC's culinary arts program. She graduated in 1996, back when they still cooked on electric stoves in the old home economics classroom on the school's main campus. Since then, Wachtel has traveled all over the world, working as a chef and line cook in Alaska, New Zealand and Paris. In 2003, Wachtel trained at Cowgirl Creamery, eventually becoming head cheesemaker. She returned to high-end restaurant kitchens with stints at Syrah in Santa Rosa and Zazu Kitchen + Farm, working as a chef under Duskie Estes.

In 2015, Wachtel was promoted to winery chef at Rodney Strong, a job that entails overseeing the entire culinary program at the winery, including The Terrace, which focuses on wine tastings, food and wine pairings, cheese and charcuterie.

Wachtel, 39, says that the younger folks working in her kitchen get tired of hearing about how they should save money by attending SRJC rather than spending the money on private school in Italy or Paris. But, she says, she can't emphasize enough the value of this affordable, rigorous and community-centered culinary gem.

"They put so much care and energy into that beautiful building. It's a great program, and that's evidenced by the growth over the last 20 years. You don't have a more dedicated team of people who really want to see their students succeed and get placed locally. They have so much community outreach. I know of several chefs, including myself, who will call Betsy Fischer and ask if they have anyone for particular jobs. To me, that's a huge resource."



Betsy Fischer and Jim Cason