

Chefs move into new 21,000-square-foot facility

BY KEN ABRAHAMZKY
STAFF WRITER

If Schoolcraft College is among the crème de la crème of culinary schools in educating future chefs, then the new VistaTech building could very well make the college's culinary arts program the titan of the cooking world.

Schoolcraft's culinary arts instructors and students recently returned from spring break sautéing, braising and broiling inside the new \$26.7 million VistaTech facility. The culinary arts department will take up 21,000 square feet of the 85,740-square-foot facility.

Joe Decker, a certified master pastry chef and instructor at Schoolcraft, said the chef instructors "just wanted to pinch" themselves once they saw the new facility.

"I've traveled all over Europe, and it has (those kitchens) beat," Decker said. "It will allow us to teach at a high level. It allows us to be more creative, and give us the ability to transfer that knowledge to students."

A HUB OF LIFELONG LEARNING

Housed on the north side of the Waterman Center on the campus on Haggerty between Six Mile and Seven Mile roads in Livonia, the VistaTech facility was created as a "connector" between local businesses, computer technology, business development and culinary arts to create new opportunities for students, recent graduates and entrepreneurs, according to Bruce Konowalow, director of the culinary arts department.

"We want to be a hub for lifelong learning," Konowalow said. "We don't want (culinary students) here for two years, then they're gone. That's not what's evolved at this school. They're back. They're maybe taking continuing ed classes or working with our people in small business development."

Talk about high tech. These students will step into a 21st century kitchen.

Several of the six kitchens include cameras that zoom in

on instructors with monitors for the students at each station. The demonstration kitchen includes a DVD player, VCR and a personal computer. "I'll want to do a demonstration, the camera and a small monitor allows you to see all of the action," Konowalow said.

There will be less huddling around the instructor, as each of these students will have his or her own stations and setups, from the culinary arts department.

■ The American Harvest restaurant will move to the new facility, increasing the seating capacity to 86 persons – or 104 if the bar area is used – in a dining area of 2,800 square feet. The new restaurant will feature a chef's table, or what might be described as a food lover's box seat, to observe the chefs and the students working in a 1,600-square-foot kitchen and serving their way through lunch, and now, dinner. The restaurant has a tentative opening date in early April, Konowalow said.

Restaurant patrons will be able to walk through a canopied cover dropoff site before entering the facility. The facility and walkway is adjacent to the north parking lot of the college, so patrons won't have to walk as far as they used to in entering the restaurant.

■ A new pantry, the Main Street Cafe, will feature the old goodies, such as baked goods and confectionery sweets and delights. Located along the main hall (in what college officials call Main Street) that connects the business development, the multipurpose room and the restaurant, the former Professor's Pantry will also add carryout meals to its culinary repertoire. Instructor Jeff Gabriel, a certified master chef and owner of The Farm in Port Austin, will oversee that menu, Konowalow said.

■ The facility features a 2,000-square-foot production kitchen and a 1,700-square-foot demonstration kitchen for a food tech class. Students will work at 16 individual stations

on four islands which include four burners for sauces, sauté pans or pots and grills. This is a real teaching lab," Konowalow said.

An oven, a Rational KlimaPlus Control unit, includes a rack to hold 100 plates of food. The unit allows chefs to program the time and temperature to reheat food, while retaining its moisture.

"The students will learn flexibility in how one chef can do a banquet for 100 people," Konowalow said. "We tried that unit with fish, and it worked beautifully."

The additional space allows for a breakfast and pantry class to set up a buffet in the same kitchen.

■ Then there's the 2,250-square-foot pastry kitchen with stations for students. Each station has a steam-jacketed kettle and granite counters to allow for students to create heated sugar or chocolate that needs to retain a uniform temperature.

"When you roll out sugar that's been heated to 200 degrees, you need to put it on a surface that absorbs the heat," Konowalow said. "When chocolate needs to be tempered, they need to know how to do it. You throw it out there on the slab, and work with it at the right temperature, so it retains its shape."

A smaller room adjacent to the pastry kitchen will maintain a 68° temperature to assist the students in working with chilled ingredients, such as buttermilk, or chocolate dishes during hot summer days. Breads will be created in a 1,350-square-foot bakery.

CURING AND STEAMING

Students will work in a "drying room," which retains a 60° temperature, for making cured meats, such as sausage and prosciutto. The day Konowalow gave his tour to a reporter and photographer, students instructed by chef Brian Poley, owner of Five Lakes Grill in Milford, created landjager, a Swiss dried fermented sausage, and Krakov,

a Polish salami. An adjacent demonstration area also has a camera and 10 screens where Poley will instruct.

Unbelievably, the old kitchen for the restaurant didn't have a broiler. The new restaurant kitchen has one now. "All we had before was a grill," Konowalow said.

The facility will allow students to learn all the techniques with new culinary equipment that cost about \$2 million. Approximately \$150,000 in donated equipment was given to the culinary arts department by manufacturers.

Another oven uses combination steam-conventional heat. "Say you wanted to cook a duck for the first 10 minutes with no moisture, then the next 30 at 300 degrees with 20 percent moisture, then the final 20 minutes at 370 with no moisture, you can program it in there," Konowalow said.

"Or a chef can monitor the progress of it from a remote location, like checking the temperature. This unit contains a modem, so you can do that. We intend to get the students exposed to all the technology." Many of the coolers present printouts of temperatures.

Then there's a steam-inject-oven and a rotating oven.

"We did get substantial donations (of equipment)," Konowalow said. "We get them to help us out and there's some reduction in costs. They also know this is a unique showcase. If they sold us or donated



Culinary arts student Danielle Mallon presents a plate of pork tenderloin as part of her *La Carte* class just days before the department moved from the old kitchen into the VistaTech facility.

equipment, they can call us and ask if their customers can see how something works, we'll say, 'Sure, come on over.' Decker wanted a temperature-controlled water meter in the bakery.

"We do artisan breads," Konowalow said. "We use different yeast strains for different breads, and it might take two days or more for the final product. The temperature of the water is very important in the development of the yeast. It gives you the right amount of water you need at the right temperature."

College officials hope this Main Street will burst onto the national culinary scene as a home of hard work, ingenuity and new technology to help the master chefs of today inspire young chefs of tomorrow.

The VistaTech facility was created to keep Schoolcraft at the forefront of new technology in business development and culinary arts.

"That was the thrust of the president's vision of the college is to be leaders in education, not followers and to create new opportunities," Konowalow said.

"There was much interaction with the chefs and instructors, many of whom designed many kitchens of their own. The blueprint changed dramatically. The kitchen or labs were really developed with the students in mind and the technology that's available."

Decker called the facility a wonderful place.

"We've got unbelievable support from the college and the community," Decker said.

"They allowed me to design a pastry kitchen completely. Completely. They realized my vision to create the perfect pastry shop and instruct the students in it."

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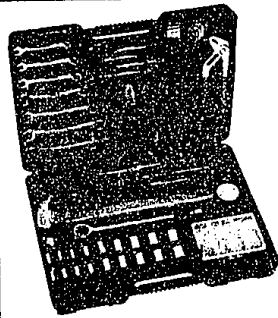
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