Golden Mushroom kitchen keeps apprentices on move

By Joanne Stewart
special writer

MINDY SAUNDERS/staff photographer

Andy Kile (left) and John DiCecco, apprentice cooks at the Golden Mushroom, prepare a galentine of halibut.

MOST OF US have seen those frozen fast-food burgers going down a conveyor belt, eventually suffering some near-atomic blast, and bunned, bagged and bought quicker than you can say, "Hold the pickle!"

As we watch everything get mechanized for service of the masses, we may forget that cooking is a contemporary art, mastered by human beings behind closed doors.

John DiCecco and Andy Kile, two apprentice cooks at the Golden Mushroom in Southfield, step out from behind the doors to reveal what the life of a cook is like in the fast lane.

"There's no nine-to-five type of shift here," DiCecco said.

"You work until you get the job done. If you have to prepare a certain amount of dressing, then believe me you don't punch out until you have that dressing.

"I WORK 6-10 hours a week without getting paid because I didn't finish the job in time. There's not even any established lunch breaks. You eat while you work.

"Of course, it's up to you if you want the break. But when you're in a rush to finish at a set time, it's best to skip the break."

A little different angle on fast-food, wouldn't you say? Human machines with no assistance from a conveyor belt. The engine that keeps DiCecco and Kile running is Master Chef Milos, a man who has given the Golden Mushroom a reputation as big as . . . er, the Golden Arches.

But seriously, Chef Milos is the Cook of Cooks. As the only master chef in Michigan and one out of 12 in the country, he has achieved the highest decoration in the culinary arts.

"Cheesebugga, cheesebugga, cheeps, Pepsi, Pepsi!"

Not, it's not that kind of fast-food command at the Golden Mushroom.

It's more like, "Pate, souffle, hors d'oeuvres — hup, two, three, four!"

"When Chef Milos says, 'Jump!' you say, 'How high?' DiCCecco quipped.

BUT LIFE AS a cook is no joke.

"I had a friend who quit the apprenticeship program after two months," Kile explained. "He just thought it was like your typical job. If you get interested in being a cook, you have to be career-minded about it.

"You can't jump into it and figure you'll work a while and then move on to another job. It's harder, much harder than anyone thinks. Everything is fast."

DiCecco lives in Madison Heights, and Kile is a Novi resident. Both 20 years of age, they started working at the Golden Mushroom two years ago. Their apprenticeship began six months ago and will continue until three years of work and school experience are completed.

Nine hours each week are devoted to textbook education at the Oakland Community College campus in Farmington Hills. Forty-five hours (and some) are spent under extreme stress in the kitchen.

IF THREE YEARS are endured, DiCecco and Kile will have become certified cooks, which is a very high honor, especially when you consider that it is an honor just to finish the program.

"Six months ago there were 25 apprentices in the program," DiCecco said. "Now there are 12. The people you'd think would make it just dropped out. And there are still two-and-a-half years to go.

"Nobody realizes how stressful this can be. You almost have to be crazy to do what we're doing."

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