



Print Page

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Got what it takes to be a 'foodie'?

By Sylvia Schon

Calling all high school “foodies.” You know who you are, and Hammond High’s award-winning ProStart culinary arts program wants you.

For the first time ever, the program will be open to all qualified public high school juniors and seniors this school year, instructor Patti Johnson said.

Students can stick to their home school and travel to the two-hour classes daily. It is a two-year program.

Graduates come away with certification recognized by the National Restaurant Association.

Parents of interested students can contact the counselor’s office at their home school about signing up for the program.

Johnson’s students last year won the state title in culinary arts and finished 13th in the nation in the San Diego competition.

The food service and restaurant industry is a three trillion dollar a year industry nationwide and the second largest employer aside from government.

Industry movers and shakers have a stake in trained young talent.

“The National Restaurant Association is looking for leaders in the industry. Therefore, this program is designed for owners, managers and executive chefs,” Johnson said. “They are looking for people who see food and the restaurant industry as an exciting, interesting place to be. I think if it’s in you, it’s in you.”

ProStart students can discover if they are suited to some segment of the industry and at the same time take a big step toward their goal.

“The beauty of ProStart is that even though they may not decide to have this as their permanent career, they can use it to work their way through college,” Johnson said.

A 2.5 grade point average is required for the program, but students with a 2.0 can also qualify with a teacher’s referral.

It also doesn’t hurt to be a “foodie,” but there is also room for business-minded manager/owner types as well.

“Foodies are people who see food as an art, as an expression of yourself or your creativity. Foodies are different than other people,” she said.

With ProStart, students can take on a professional edge, learning numerous aspects of the business — everything from professional chef’s equipment and food preparation to menu pricing and customer-friendly service.

“ProStart is a two-fold curriculum. One side is culinary — we do the chef thing and we learn tremendous amounts of information about the cooking processes, terminology and restaurant-style cooking,” Johnson said. “The other side is management. We also learn about the business and what it takes to be successful in the restaurant industry. If you can’t reach the bottom line, it doesn’t matter how good you can cook.”

Johnson had to train for three years to get certification to teach the course. She is

See FOODIES 2A

the only certified secondary food service educator in the state.

She has seen some wonderful things happen for students while teaching the course. As part of the course, students must go out and find a job and work 400 hours in the restaurant industry in some capacity.

One of her students has moved up to the grill at Topela. Another is a hostess at Trey Yuen, one works at Adobe, two are at the Cocoa Bean and others work at various fast food places.

“I feel so good about it because for so many years we did not equip our students with marketable skills,” Johnson said. “This is something they can take and support themselves with for the rest of their lives. Most of the ProStart students go onto college or culinary school. That’s what it’s designed for. Some work their way up through the ranks and become very successful.”

ProStart is no crimp course, and Johnson said she expects a lot of her students.

And they, in turn, give back a lot.

“What rings my bell is when I see that child just light up and realize that dreams can happen. Their confidence is so fragile. But that moment when they realize, ‘I can really do this,’ it’s just life-changing,” Johnson said, turning her head to shield a sudden mist in her eyes.

The local ProStart program has had great support from the parish school board, Superintendent Mark Kolwe, and Hammond High Principal Carmon Moore.

Chefs Larry Johnson of Pier 112 in Hammond and Phil O’Donnell of O’Donnell’s in Ponchatoula helped launch the program and mentored students for the state and national competitions.

Mike Landry at Don’s Seafood has supported the ProStart student award each year.

Patti Johnson said she also has commitments this year from Topela and Carter’s Plantation and Mark Lyons at Ruth’s Chris in Metairie.