



— Photo by Cindy Shegan Keeley/Daily News

Students Tashon B. and Michael C., Culinary Arts Instructor Jim Booker and students Daishawn G. and Jonathan W. show off the bruschetta and salmon they prepared for Wednesday's Auberle luncheon.

Auberle cooks up 5-star culinary class

By PATRICK CLOONAN Daily News Staff Writer

It's an odd suggestion to make on the night before someone is to come to your school for lunch. "Go out to the best restaurant you can think of," Auberle CEO John Lydon said Wednesday at his McKeesport institution.

Lydon will bet anyone his culinary arts students offer food that will "equal or exceed ... the best restaurant you have been in." More than 100 diners had a chance to test Lydon's word at an annual event where four graduating culinary students received certificates of completion.

"This is kind of like a final exam for the culinary arts program," Lydon said.

There was a roasted ham, salmon in a lemon dill sauce, chicken cacciatore with rice, fruit salad with yogurt and an assortment of cakes and cookies.

There was an assortment of deviled eggs — one set was flavored with dill, another with bacon, a third with crab.

All of that was done by youth in a 15-week program that certified 22 students for work in the food industry.



— Photo by Cindy Shegan Keeley/Daily News

Auberle CEO John Lydon said the food prepared by the students under the guidance of Culinary Arts instructor Jim Booker could match the best an area restaurant offers.

“All of this food was prepared by our students,” culinary arts instructor Jim Booker said. “Fourteen weeks ago, if Diddley or Squat walked in here, they wouldn’t know either.” They know a lot more and like what they learn.

Lauri Fink, a former Auberle staffer now working with the Hillman Foundation, recalled how a student wanted to continue in the course a couple years back — after a court sent him home to McKees Rocks.

“We asked the judge if they could not discharge him,” Lydon recalled.

“He took two buses to come back here ... and got his certificate,” Fink said.

One satisfied diner is Kim Berkeley Clark, a judge in the Family Division of Allegheny County Common Pleas Court.

“Judge Clark hired Auberle kids twice to cater events at the Allegheny County court,” Lydon said.

Students also catered events at churches and the Allegheny County Office of Children, Youth and Families. They’re working now on a holiday event at the Mon Valley CYF office.

Clark appreciates more than just good meals from the McKeesport institution.

“We use Auberle services and programs a lot, from residential group homes to foster care to in-home services to alternative education,” Clark said.

“At our request, Auberle developed a delinquent shelter to deal with the overcrowding at Shuman (Juvenile Detention Center in Pittsburgh).” Lydon also cited the role volunteers have at Auberle, pointing to Jan Seaton of Colteryahn Dairies, who offered her background as a tester for the Allegheny County Health Department to the Auberle program.

Five graduates were honored, with four of them on hand to get certificates.

Daishawn G. extended a joy of cooking to a skill for such dishes as curry chicken — and an opportunity to learn about food safety.

Tashon B. discovered an ability to create Thai dishes such as crab crowns and fresh spring rolls.

Jonathan W. discovered the need for clean hands and surfaces when preparing food — something he needed to know for the ServSafe test that opens the way to jobs in such places as Giant Eagle, Eat’n Park and King’s restaurants.

Michael C. found he could fix apple crisp and more. His instructors said being in the program provided him with a focus on what is needed to be a success.

Usually, Lydon said, a food service provider might hire 100, train them for 15 weeks and “after three tries, they’re delighted if they get 50 percent” to pass the test.

“It really gives our kids a leg up in employment,” the Auberle CEO said. Steven C. wasn’t there Wednesday, but Auberle officials said he was amazed at how much work is done to prepare a dish — and he learned a lot about the importance of planning and preparing when cooking.

“Stay focused because it’s an opportunity to better yourself if you take it seriously,” said former student Les F., who was on hand to congratulate the new grads.