

career center

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Focus On... RESTAURANT COOKS



Students at the Culinary Institute of Charleston practice preparing, cooking and presenting food. An associate degree or certificate helps students gain valuable experience and learn important culinary skills.

By RACHEL COOK

In a city where fine dining rules, a career as a cook can be especially rich and rewarding. But Chef Michael Carmel warns that a career in the kitchen, while gratifying, isn't as glamorous as television shows make it out to be. "You have to constantly be moving and working, so there's a lot of physical stamina required," Carmel said. "We tell the students coming (into our culinary programs) that this is not the kind of industry that you can just sit and relax all day long."

But if you're a hard worker with a passion for good food, this may be the perfect job for you. For beginners and restaurant workers looking for a leg up, the Culinary Arts program at the Culinary Institute of Charleston at Trident Technical College offers a Restaurant Cooks certificate. The program requires students to complete six courses for a total of 18 credits. Boasting 40 years of experience in the food service industry, as well as 25 years of expertise as an educator and program director, Carmel is the department head for the Culinary Arts program. He described the Restaurant Cooks certificate as a quick training program to get students ready to work in kitchens in the community.

Students learn about American and international foods and sharpen their real world skills working in the college's two restaurants. At Relish Restaurant Group® Restaurant in North Charleston, students learn short order cooking and how to craft fresh salads and sandwiches and make a blue plate special. They also make international cuisine in the fine dining room, including Mediterranean and French regional dishes.

Aspiring chefs master the cuisine of the Americas and a local sustainable menu at the school's 181 Palmer restaurant located at Trident Tech's downtown campus. Through the program, students learn about international cultures and food and why we cook the food we do. They also learn how to work as members of a kitchen team and gain the skills needed to qualify for high-end restaurant jobs. "They learn how to multitask in a restaurant; they learn some managerial skills like food costs and labor costs. They learn how to communicate better," Carmel said. To qualify for the program, aspiring chefs must have a high school degree. They also need to have earned the college's Culinary Arts

certificate, which requires 18 credits to obtain, or have advanced standing, such as years of experience in the food service industry.

The program can be accomplished in one semester by a full-time student, but Carmel said students usually need about a semester and a half to complete the certificate. "This certificate gives them a strong foundation in various types of cooking so that when they get out to work they have at least an understanding of what's expected of them," Carmel said.

After earning the certificate, students are ready to work as prep cooks. Carmel said they'd usually start out in the cold department prepping salads and desserts before working their way on to the line, and then into assistant chef positions. Carmel estimated it takes three to six months for a student to get the feel for a restaurant and reach the point where they're ready to work the hot line.

Students who are passionate about working with people and outgoing do well in this field. Carmel said students who can handle pressure and multitask also tend to excel. Plus, it's a great career for people who hunger for quick feedback on their job performance. "For people that need to feel fulfilled in knowing that they're doing a good job, this is an excellent industry," Carmel said.

While students don't have to be Arnold Schwarzenegger, physical strength and stamina are needed to be a professional cook. Restaurants require people to work 8 to 12 hour days, sometimes longer, Carmel said.

"It's not as easy as it looks on TV and students come to find that out very quickly," Carmel said.

But the challenges are all manageable for those who eat, sleep and breathe a love of food, Carmel said. For restaurant cooks, a lifelong commitment to the industry pays off with long-term satisfaction and a rewarding career spent surrounded by comrades. Working odd hours in sometimes strenuous conditions, restaurant workers develop their own unique culture and community, Carmel said. Being a member of that group is a perk of the gig.

Fortunately for those ready for a career in the kitchen, the Lowcountry has plenty of jobs waiting for them.

"In Charleston, there are four or five jobs for every student that comes out (of our program)," Carmel said.

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Skills

Aspiring restaurant cooks should be able to multitask and flourish in a high-pressure work environment. Motivated, outgoing individuals who love food and thrive on feedback do well in this profession.

Education and Training

Schooling

Trident Technical College offers an associate degree in culinary arts, as well as options for a baking and pastry career path and a sports and health nutrition path. The college offers six certificates (Artisanal Foods, Baking and Pastry, Culinary Arts, Culinary Manager, Restaurant Cooks, and Sports and Health Nutrition) and two advanced certificates (Advanced Baking and Pastry and Advanced Chocolate and Cake). The Restaurant Cooks certificate requires 18 credit hours, including courses such as international cuisine and cuisine of the Americas.

Financial Aid

Grants, scholarships, loans and work/study programs are available for college students. South Carolina lottery-funded tuition assistance, which can pay more than 50 percent of tuition costs, is available to TTC students. To qualify for most of this aid, high school students must submit a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), which is available online at www.fafsa.gov. For more information on federal financial aid and programs or to apply online, visit the U.S. Department of Education website at www.ed.gov.

Opportunity

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment for cooks is projected to grow 10 percent from 2012 to 2022. Employment for restaurant cooks is projected to grow by 15 percent in that same period.

Working Environment

Cooks often work long hours and physical stamina is needed for long days spent on their feet. Cooks also frequently work on holidays and weekends.

Q&A



Chef Scott Stefanelli
Chef Instructor

Q. What is a restaurant cook and what does a restaurant cook do?

A. A restaurant cook is involved in the preparation and service of finished food items, both hot and cold. Some of the specific things that a cook does includes receiving food from purveyors; storing food items properly; cutting and peeling fruits and vegetables; cooking starches such as rice, pasta and potatoes; baking breads, cookies, cakes and various desserts; making soups and sauces; slicing meats and cheeses; assembling sandwiches; portioning and cooking meat and seafood; and maintaining cooking equipment. Maintaining the cleanliness of the restaurant, particularly the cooking area, is a major responsibility.

Q. Where do most restaurant cooks work?

A. There is a large range of the types and styles of restaurants that employ cooks. Some jobs require simple reheating or service of ready-to-eat food, while others require highly technical skills gained from on-the-job experience or postsecondary schooling. Some examples of these jobs include bakery and sandwich shops, fast-food restaurants, cafeterias and commissaries, fast casual dining, fine dining, resort restaurant outlets, airline and train meals, food trucks, and specialty food shops or emporiums.

Q. How do you get started in a career as a restaurant cook?

A. Many people interested in becoming a restaurant cook attend a two-year associate degree program for culinary or baking and pastry arts like that offered by the Culinary Institute of Charleston. This education will allow the cook to gain experience and knowledge working with a variety of foods and ingredients and possibly propel him or her to obtain a higher position in the kitchen upon graduating the program. Although not required, an associate degree can kick-start a cook's career and, depending on his or her career path, can be beneficial as he or she moves up the ladder. The Culinary Institute of Charleston also offers a one-semester Restaurant Cooks certificate program that prepares students to be entry-level cooks in food service operations. If a person is without a degree or certificate, they usually start in the area of cold food and salad preparation to gain experience and knowledge of how to operate within a kitchen. From there, as a cook gains experience and confidence, he or she will typically start training and working on more difficult stations, which include hot food cookery.

Q. What characteristics and skills does a successful restaurant cook need?

A. A restaurant cook needs a desire to learn and openness to new and different ideas, as the cooking profession changes rapidly. Other skills include flexibility to work at different times of the day and days of the week, a professional attitude, and attention to detail. He or she should have an ability to think and react in the moment while cooking and dealing with the public's needs. Analytical skills are important, as is a desire to adhere to cleanliness and sanitary standards.

Q. What are some of the benefits of working in this field?

A. There is also a real sense of community in our industry. Restaurant cooks work hard — sometimes longer hours than most — and there is a real camaraderie among cooks and chefs alike. You will make great long-lasting connections as you travel and work your way up the ladder. A motivated cook can have a lifelong career path of growth and an opportunity to benefit financially. Most employers feed their staff or give significant discounts for meals. A percentage of fine dining jobs come with other perks such as the ability to use health club facilities, discounts on travel, and hotel lodging if you work for a resort or hotel chain. Many fine dining restaurants take part in festivals and special events, which offer opportunities for cooks to expand their knowledge and experiences. Another benefit is that you can work literally anywhere in the world; restaurants and food service outlets are universal.

Q. What is the employment outlook for a restaurant cook?

A. The cooking industry has seen tremendous growth and exposure with television, social media and blogs. As a result, there is a continuous growth of new and expanding operations looking for staff. There are plenty of jobs to be had in the industry, and there is a tremendous potential for professional growth if one follows a consistent employment history.

Q. What advice would you give to someone considering a career in this field?

A. I would advise someone to forget everything that they see on television and in the media. Whether in the fast food segment of the industry, the fast casual or the fine dining, a career in food can be glamorous, but it can also be a grind. Cooking requires courage and a willingness to sacrifice to be successful and fulfilled. It can help to work in the industry and try it out before committing yourself to a career in it. Make sure it suits your personality and that you can tolerate the people and the type of work that you will most likely be doing for a long time to come. If you find that you like it, a course of study could jump-start your career.

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Want more info?

ONLINE:
American Culinary Federation, www.acfchefs.org
American Institute of Baking, www.aibonline.org
International Council on Hotel, Restaurant, and Institutional Education, www.chrie.org
National Restaurant Association, www.restaurant.org

Jobs in this field:

Occupation	Wages by Area*
Chefs and Head Cooks	U.S. \$24,200-\$74,200+ S.C. \$21,200-\$57,300+ CH \$25,000-\$60,400+
First Line Supervisors of Food Prep and Service Workers	U.S. \$19,700-\$48,200+ S.C. \$18,300-\$43,800+ CH \$20,700-\$44,300+
Cooks, Institution and Cafeteria	U.S. \$17,000-\$35,600+ S.C. \$16,200-\$29,100+ CH \$16,900-\$29,400+
Restaurant Cooks	U.S. \$17,100-\$31,700+ S.C. \$16,100-\$26,200+ CH \$16,400-\$28,300+

*Source/Note: Wage data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics & SC Department of Employment and Workforce. Wage levels vary by skill level, tenure, and geographical areas. For more occupational information, contact Gary Crossley of LovetoWork.org, LLC at lovetoworkorg@yahoo.com or 843-452-4121.