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# Culinary academy feeds strong student demand

## Longtime program preps chefs, others in industry

**Blythe Thimsen** July 14th, 2016

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Inland Northwest Culinary Academy students prepare to serve a course at the Sip Savor & Swirl fundraising event held at the Spokane Community College each spring.

Fine cuisine sometimes can be found in unlikely spots.

Such arguably is the case with Spokane Community College's Inland Northwest Culinary Academy. An American Culinary Federation-accredited program, the culinary school is located in the Old Main building on the Spokane Community College campus.

What looks like, on the outside, an industrially bland building, holds within it industrial kitchens where skills, confidence, and some delicious career opportunities are cooked up.

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When Spokane Community College launched in September 1963 as “a two-year community college where students could learn a trade or start a four-year college degree without breaking the bank,” many of the classes offered were different from the ones found in the current catalog. Musical instrument repair, custom apparel, and watch repair have fallen by the wayside, but culinary training continues to remain a strong presence on campus.

While there wasn’t a culinary program as extensive as INCA back in 1963, there was an instructor named Orlando Longo who was hired to teach food trades. He specialized in commercial baking and cooking during the 12 years he was at the school, from 1963 to 1975.

Fast forward to today, and the impact of Longo is remembered with the aptly named Orlando’s, the student-managed, full-service restaurant that’s open to the public. Orlando’s offers INCA students the experience of working in a hands-on, real-world restaurant. It’s gourmet food in an old concrete-block building.

INCA, with the help of Orlando’s, continues a 50-plus-year tradition of offering students vocational training in the culinary industry on the SCC campus, at 1810 N. Greene in East Spokane.

That vocational training extends beyond learning to cook. The first quarter is an



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introduction to the hospitality industry. During that quarter, students receive chef uniforms, which they are required to wear during their time in the academy. Second quarter is basic kitchen, third and fourth quarters are advanced kitchen, fifth quarter is pastries, and sixth quarter is dining area.

“The knowledge and competencies required by the ACF teach students all the cooking fundamentals needed to enter the hospitality industry as a highly qualified cook and/or, server,” says Chef Curtis Smith, who is an INCA instructor. Smith, previously the chef de cuisine at Beverly’s Restaurant, at the Coeur d’Alene Resort, also served as the executive pastry chef at the resort before returning to his alma mater in 2006 to teach.

He says he always has enjoyed sharing his expertise and experiences with others, so teaching was a dream come true.

“Seeing students become successful and eventually become my colleagues is very satisfying,” he says. “When our students move on to become owners, chefs, managers, and leaders in our local food community, we feel that we have done our job.”

Well-known INCA graduates include Adam Hegsted, chef/owner of Wandering Table; Charlie Connor, chef at Wild Sage; Kylsey Pehl, pastry chef at Madeline’s; and David Lee, corporate chef for the Spokane-based Twigs restaurant group. Bob Lombardi, INCA’s own pastry chef, has been featured on Food Network shows such as Halloween Wars and Sugar Dome, while local cake artist and buttercream sculptor Becky Wortman also has been featured on Food Network.



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Smith says the culinary program always has been popular and revered by the community, based on the reputation of its graduates, but there has been increased interest over the past few years from students, resulting in waiting lists to be accepted into the program.

“The rise in interest in cooking over the last 10 years, due to the Food Network and other media, has helped,” he says. “Sometimes, students perceive the profession as fun, creative, and exciting, which it certainly is, but they are not aware of how hard the work is. It is not all fame and glory. It is often work that is behind the scenes and is very hard, physically. The hours are long and it is mentally demanding, so students need to have a genuine passion for food and cooking in order to be successful.”

Smith says hundreds of cooking schools operate around the country, and many of them are for-profit operations.

“Tuition for many of these schools can be \$50,000-\$80,000 for basically the same AA degree INCA offers,” he says. “We are ACF accredited, taught by qualified and passionate instructors for just a little over \$10,000 total. We feel it is a top-notch culinary education and a tremendous value.”

According to Annie Gannon, communications manager for Community Colleges of Spokane, an INCA student pays a basic tuition of around \$4,400 per year, an estimated average based on taking a full load of courses. The culinary program has additional costs of about \$1,600 for books, supplies, and equipment.

Class levels are kept small to allow greater attention and direction from instructors. This spring, 32 students graduated from the program with an associate's degree in culinary arts. Smith estimates the program has produced about 1,500 graduates since its founding.

Students spend four of their six quarters involved in the operation of Orlando's, contributing as line cooks, pastry cooks, and dining room servers.

"We try to replicate the real world as much as possible in Orlando's," says Smith. "Besides the basics of cooking 'a la minute' (referring to food to order), students also learn time management and organization, working quickly under pressure and working as a team, as well as learning impeccable cleanliness standards. They also work front of the house as servers."

Ellen Arguinchona, a 2013 graduate of the academy, says that not all experiences are cherished equally by the students, but they are all necessary.

"We spent time learning to serve, and I was thinking, 'I came here to learn to cook,'" says Arguinchona, expressing a common frustration of those who are eager to get into the kitchen, rather than focus on the management pieces. She realizes, though, that these lessons are essential components in a well-rounded culinary education.

"INCA's focus is to prepare people for the industry," says Arguinchona, "and it really does offer a more realistic view of what is expected (in a restaurant) compared to schools that simply teach you to cook."

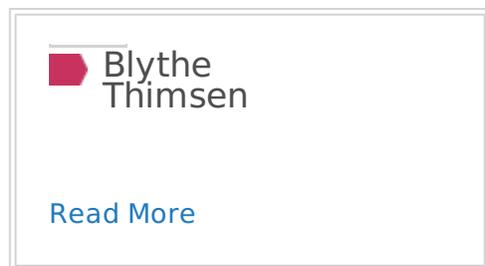
She knows this firsthand. After receiving her associate's degree, Arguinchona transferred to Johnson & Wales University, in Denver, graduating in May 2015 with a bachelor's degree in culinary nutrition. She now is enrolled in graduate school at Washington State University, where she is pursuing a master's degree in nutrition and exercise physiology, so she can be a registered dietician.

"Graduating from culinary school built my confidence as a cook, a ton," she says, "but it also is a cool way to study nutrition."

Armed with her experiences and education from the academy, Arguinchona savors the challenge of re-creating recipes at home.

"I like to cook new stuff," she says. "When I go to a fancy restaurant, it inspires me to try to recreate a dish."

One of Arguinchona's recent re-creations was a homemade baked ricotta with a browned butter balsamic sauce and mushroom confit. Having the ability to create that masterpiece in her kitchen is born from the skills and education she received at INCA, she says.



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