Culinary students host Jazz-n-Juice’

Multicourse meal a final project

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In Cabrillo College’s Pino Alto Restaurant kitchen on Thursday, 11 culinary students clad in white chef jackets and dark pants were bustling about, each preparing dishes for the evening’s menu.

One student was slicing a pile of freshly roasted red peppers, while another was brewing a pot of soup. In another part of the kitchen, a woman was chopping fresh herbs, while another student was painstakingly wrapping prosciutto around figs for an appetizer.

But amid the flurry of activity typical of an evening in a busy restaurant, the students were also preparing for their final project: presenting a multicourse public dinner, which will be held Wednesday night.

That dinner, titled “Jazz-n-Juice,” culminates a class assignment that tasked advanced culinary students with creating a menu, then pairing wine from a local winery with the meals they designed.

In addition to student-created, Italian-themed dishes such as beef carpaccio with parmesan, salt cod simmered with tomatoes and capers, and grilled Tuscan chicken, the dinner will include music by local jazz duo NoNette.

The dinner was the brainchild of chef instructor Michael Wille, who assigned it in lieu of an exam.

For Jazz-n-Juice, Wille is hoping to be able to set up tables on the lawn behind the Session House, a historic building on the outskirts of Cabrillo’s Aptos campus.

Pino Alto Restaurant has been serving lunch and dinner for about 10 years, and has gained a loyal following of regulars who come to enjoy dishes created entirely by students.

The small dining room is filled with warm light, natural wood highlights and a fireplace. In good weather, the restaurant opens its deck overlooking the lawn, which is surrounded by trees.

As part of the advanced program, culinary students design new lunch and dinner menus every week, and a three-course lunch costs only $9.

The college’s horticulture program grows much of the produce used in the dishes, and a group of ceramics students made the salt and pepper shakers and the small vases that sit atop the tables.

“It is a really rewarding program,” Wille said. “I think people are really excited about the community involvement.”

The problem, he said, is that the restaurant can only operate while classes are in session, making it difficult to grow a customer base.

While good for business, drawing more customers would be “both a blessing and a curse,” according to culinary student Robin Sihler, who was preparing the evening’s desserts.

The intimate setting and personalized service, Sihler said, is part of Pino Alto’s draw.

Sihler, 42, said she decided to earn her associate degree in culinary arts after her kids grew up and left home.

“I wanted to do something I wanted to do, not just something to pay the bills,” she said. “I love cooking, but as a room you usually do it just to get food on the table.”

Sihler said she eventually wants to be a pastry chef.

Lisa Diaz of Santa Cruz said she wants to use her culinary arts degree to open her own bed and breakfast. She was washing dishes after making a tray of focaccia bread.

Diaz said she spent many years working in coffeehouses, and said the formality of upscale restaurants appeals to her.

“Pino Alto is a 180-degree turnaround,” she said. “This is fine dining. This is a totally different world.”

Jazz-n-Juice is scheduled for Wednesday from 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. in the Pino Alto Restaurant, located in Cabrillo College’s Session House, 6500 Soquel Drive in Aptos. Tickets cost $25, and space is limited. For information, call 479-6524 or visit www.pinoaltorestaurant.org.