Cabrillo’s culinary gem
Pino Alto Restaurant a classroom for up-and-coming chefs

By TODD GUILD
Of Apts Life

APORTS — On a chilly day in October, first-year Cabrillo College culinary student Diego Rosillo was busy putting the final touches on the tables at Pino Alto Restau-
 rant, the college’s working lab for gourmet-
 ing chefs. After he polished and laid out silverware, arranged the autumn-themed table cen-
terpieces and made sure the settings were perfect, Rosillo explained what drew him to the popular program. “I grew up with a single mother, and did a lot of cooking,” he said. After a childhood spent learning how to make such Mexican standards as posole and mole, Rosillo graduated from Watson-
ville High School and, with no idea what he wanted to do, started with the culinary program.

Along with his fellow novice students, Rosillo, 21, was tasked with preparing lunch, which that week was Middle Eastern, a theme that rotates weekly. Others might include Asian, Spanish or Italian.

The task would not be an easy one. With minimal guidance from chef instructors, the students rotate through each station of the restaurant, giving them practice with such tasks as serving, hosting, baking, cooking and running the kitchen. “Last week I was head chef, now I’m a waiter,” Rosillo said.

The advanced culinary students are tasked with making dinner, a larger menu featuring slightly more complex dishes. All the students, however, practice de-
veloping recipes for the ever-changing menus.

The idea, said chef instructor Hector Quiriz, is to teach novice students how to work in a restaurant by giving them a working picture of how they operate. The students know whether they have

chosen the right career path after the first course, Quiriz said. “That’s the difficulty of our job,” he said. “Taking people who have never been in a restaurant, giving them a two-week orient-
tion and letting them do it.”

The kitchen was bustling with students, each of whom were tasked with a separate menu item. One was preparing naan, while another was chopping carrots for lentil soup. At other stations, cooks were making spinach salad, pita bread, lamb and the dessert, a chocolate apricot tor
e.

In fact, everything about the meal, from the tatziki and harissa sauces to the zatar, is made by the students.

“This happens every day,” Quiriz said. “Every day we cook from scratch, which is a challenge.”

Quiriz is a Cabrillo success story himself. Born and raised in Watsonville, he had a difficult time academically until a high school home economics class uncov-
ered a love for cooking.

After struggling in Cabrillo, he remem-
bered that class and signed up with the program.

He found immediate success, and was

recruited as a teaching assistant after his first semester. He has been teaching since. “Every day is a new challenge, but it’s fun at the same time,” he said. “I love my job.”

Adam Vear, who was a cook for the day, was in the kitchen preparing the lamb with tatziki sauce. Like Rosillo, he learned to prepare food from his grandmother, an early education that sparked his desire to be a chef.

He said he started with only basic culi-
nary skills, which he said was no problem in a program that quickly and efficiently imparts the knowledge and skills he needs.

“I love giving people food and seeing how happy they are,” he said. “It’s very satisfying.”

Natalie Chamberlain came with a bit more experience, having worked in a working in a Capitola bakery. She said she hopes to learn the skills to one day own her own.

“It’s going great,” she said. “The program is amazing and they have great instructors. I’m definitely learning a lot.”

A falafel sandwich with tatziki and harissa sauces is on Pino Alto’s Middle Eastern menu. Photo by Tarno Hannula/Apts Life

Review

By TODD GUILD and TARNO HANNULA
Of Apts Life

Pino Alto Restaurant has been serving lunch and dinner for about 13 years, and has gained a loyal following of regulars who come to enjoy dishes created entirely by students.

Tucked into the historic Seson House, the restaurant offers a quiet, intimate dining room filled with warm light and natural wood highlights. A fireplace warms the room in winter, and in good weather the restaurant opens its deck overlooking the sprawling back lawn, a verdant, treed

lined place sometimes used for weddings and other events.

We were promptly seated, however, and our friendly waiter Diego Rosillo promptly greeted us and took our drink orders.

From the Middle Eastern-themed menu of three items I chose the falafel sandwich with tatziki and harissa sauces ($10), but it was a hard choice between that and the curried salmon in pita bread ($12).

I got the Grilled Lamb Pita Sandwich with tatziki sauce ($10).

I was told by chef instructor Hector Quiriz that the service, largely provided by students new to the food service industry, might be a bit slow.

It was not. By any means, neither did we find ourselves wanting for anything. Diego, checked on us several times, was more than accommodating.

The basket of bread that came with the meal was a bit sparse – just two pieces – and we had to ask for more. But it was excel-

lent and came with olive oil and zaatar, a Middle Eastern spice mixture for dipping, which was new to me.

Both our entrees came with a delicious, rich lentil soup, and a spinach salad, which was topped with sliced apple and pome-

granate seeds and dressed with a tangy vinaigrette dressing.

My falafel was crisp and rich, and it was

fully of chopped vegetables. Better still, the tender pita bread held together throughout.

Tarno said his sandwich was “delici-

ous,” despite the fact that the tatziki sauce was apparently forgotten.

The falafel was ripe and was served with juicy and piping hot, he said. “The home-

made pita bread was warm and toasted slightly to a golden brown.”

Both of us also noted that our lunches were portioned perfectly.

While Tarno passed on the chocolate tor
e with apricots, I have never been one to turn down dessert.

I was not disappointed. The chocolate was a deep, rich flavor which was com-
plemented by the dried apricots.

The restaurants wine list features several selections donated by local wineries like as Apts Creek Vineyard and Burrell School. Sold at retail prices, the proceeds benefit the culinary program.

Customers may also bring in their own wine, with no corkage fee.

Russ Hobbes, who was having lunch with two friends, said he enjoys talking to the students.

“I love their enthusiasm,” he said. “Every one of them will have made part of the meal, and they are very excited to tell you what they did. It’s like talking to an artist in a gallery.”

People coming in for dinner might try the terrace menu, which has small dishes such as wild mushroom bisque ($5), a cheese plate ($7), pork belly pizza with mango barbeque sauce ($7) and avocado fries with habanera mayonnaise ($3).

The dinner menu also changes as students develop new recipes. When we went it offered appetizers such as crab cake with avocado persimmon winter slaw and sweet pepper aioli ($8), and entrees such as pimento encrusted salmon ($23), chicken breast wrapped with pancetta ($22) and butternut squash lasagna ($18).

While Pino Alto Restaurant is only open while school is in session, it is definitely worth a visit.

...Pino Alto Restaurant is open for lunch Monday through Friday from 12 to 1:30 p.m., and for dinner Wednesday through Friday from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. The terrace opens at 5 p.m.

Reservations are suggested for dinner. For information, call 479-6524 or 479-5912, or visit sites.google.com/a/cabrillo .edu/eric-carter/home.

For information about Cabrillo College, visit www.cabrillo.edu.