



FORT LAUDERDALE magazine



Read the current issue

- ☰
- FEATURES
- FASHION
- CITY LIFE ▾
- GOOD LIFE ▾
- GUIDE ▾
- FOOD & DRINK ▾
- 🔍

FROM THE PUBLISHER AROUND TOWN GOODS OLD LAUDERDALE

THE BEST OF FORT LAUDERDALE DINE FORT LAUDERDALE

- CHEF'S CORNER
- GRAZINGS
- LIGHT BITES
- RESTAURANT GUIDE

**Our Best Price.
Your Best Deal!**



**2 YEARS OF
SUBSCRIBE TODAY!**

CITY LIFE COMMUNITY

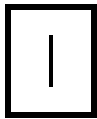
Chef G's Sizzling L's

May 1, 2017 Dori Zinn





Fort Lauderdale High School is known as the home of the Flying L's, but it's also home to a fairly new restaurant-grade kitchen-classroom. In it, Jerry Guajardo is getting students excited about cooking.



It's 9:30 on a Thursday morning. Sixteen Fort Lauderdale High School students enter Jerry Guajardo's classroom, place their backpacks at the front of the room and take seats, two or three to a table. When morning announcements end, Guajardo speaks up.

"Okay, today we're making pizza dough!" he says to his class. "And if we do it right, we'll get to eat it."

Students file into the restaurant-grade kitchen next door. A couple show him late papers because if they don't, they won't be making pizza dough today.

An hour later, they're prepping their pies.

Fort Lauderdale High School's culinary arts program is in its third year and Guajardo – "Chef G" to his students – has been here since its introduction. When the school was looking to start the program, he was one of the first they interviewed. He says his homemade chocolate chip cookies sealed the deal.

His time as a high school teacher, much like today's pizza dough, is still working through its proofing process. In culinary terms, proofing means rising. Guajardo and his program are doing just that.

"You've got to have a passion for students and thick skin," he says. "Every single student is created in a specific way. The most rewarding part is watching them

grow and their attitude of self-awareness.”

In the program, students participate in four levels. The first one is usually done by freshmen. Guajardo says most students sign up thinking it'll be an easy grade with lots of eating, but the first year is mostly bookwork – the history of cooking, fundamentals of a kitchen, culinary

experiences. It's level 2 – the one that's making pizza dough today – where there's plenty of kitchen time. Levels 3 and 4 are currently combined classes with more advanced levels of kitchen experience as well as working with students at lower levels as a teacher's aide. Since the program is so new, there aren't any students who have graduated from it yet.

Fort Lauderdale High is one of 22 Broward schools that offer a culinary arts program, says Jillian Berg, who oversees culinary, hospitality, marketing and TV production as a Broward County Public Schools curriculum supervisor. While some programs are well established, culinary arts is growing in Broward. Some schools with longer histories behind them have more than one instructor. Guajardo is still the lone teacher at Fort Lauderdale High. The hardest part for him is managing all four levels.

These new culinary arts classes might involve working in a classroom kitchen, but they're greatly different from what students of past generations did. It's unlikely a high school student today will still have the option to register for home economics (or “family and consumer science,” to give it its proper name). In those classes, students learn how to prepare meals from scratch, learn budgeting and finance management, and overall home organization.

That sounds loosely familiar to what Guajardo is doing in his classes, and he sees a lineage between home economics and his program. But he also notes their differences. Home economics teachers, he says, are not the same as professional chefs who have made the transition to teaching.

“I have 23 years of culinary arts experience that makes me qualified to teach culinary arts,” says Guajardo, who served in the Navy before studying at the Culinary Institute of North Florida and working as a chef in places such as the Ritz-Carlton, Walt Disney World's Epcot, and the Boca Raton Resort.

Berg says culinary arts and other dedicated programs concentrate on one specific

track rather than multiple disciplines.

“In 2017, we’re moving to this idea of career pathways,” she says. “Home economics could be early childhood, fashion design, some culinary and some business. Now, instead of teaching students a little bit of everything, we’re preparing and establishing students to go along a career path.”

The curriculum resonates with students. Guajardo stresses teaching leadership and management, and with that comes the responsibilities of the kitchen. In today’s class while the pizza dough is proofing, students are taking inventory in the walk-in cooler and dry storage. They calculate value, limit waste, and understand the full cost of what it takes to make something. He wants students to be successful in the marketplace and exude professionalism. He focuses on etiquette and communication – skills to show that regardless of level of experience, they are qualified to do the job. “We will probably have students that will go right into the workforce,” he says. “When they come in, it’s like coming to work. I want to make sure they aren’t sent out into the world without a clue.”

Tara Nichols, a 16-year-old level 3 student, loves the culinary arts program so much she helped found a culinary club at the school.

“As a young woman going out in the world today, we need to know how to do these things on our own,” the junior says. “For people who can’t be in class, I want them to feel comfortable in the kitchen. You need these skills to survive.”

She loves making homemade pasta. For friends, she’ll make chicken tikka masala with homemade naan and hummus – “not normal teenager food,” she laughs.

Nichols loves the culinary classes and club, but doesn’t plan to pursue it as a career when she graduates. She wants to major in social work and childhood studies. Her culinary adoration will come second.

Guajardo’s fine with that.

“If my students aren’t planning on going into the industry as a professional,” he says, “at least they will be able to cook really well at home.”

Nichols isn’t the only student of Chef G who isn’t looking to make this a full-time career. Junior Angel Knowles is a level 2 student

because during her sophomore year, she was concentrating on her pre-law classes. There was no way to work in both, so she settled for doing culinary arts in her junior year. That doesn't mean she's behind.

"My mom says I have a takeover spirit. If I like something, I have a goal," Knowles says of her strong involvement in the classes and the club. "I want to go into law, but more I get involved [in culinary arts], more I love it."

Her teacher may have something to do with it, too. Knowles says that each student has a personal relationship with Guajardo. She remembers when she first started the level 1 class. Guajardo jokingly poked fun at her last name, pretending not to know how to pronounce it. So she poked fun back, calling him guacamole. When it came time for her to move up to level 2, he recalled those fun moments. They still joke about it. "You're one of the few that can actually pronounce my name correctly," he tells her. But she remembers what he's taught her — "He tells us, 'If you're going to be in the program, learn my name. It's professionalism.'" She hasn't forgotten it.

Guajardo's individual relationship with each student pays off. While the curriculum is standard for the state, there's freedom to be creative based on students.

"I ask, 'Can they make this at home?' and then make sure there's a nutritional element to everything we make," he says. Today it's a gluten-free pizza dough option.

The students' diversity also helps drive the menu — which in turn shows them that they can make the foods that represent them.

It all creates a space where students can get excited about preparing their own food.

"They slowly change their thinking," Guajardo says, "about wanting to cook."

Related Topics

#Community #Fort Lauderdale High School