Press Release

Release Nr:  2204-01

April 1, 2022

Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum chefs share passion for cooking with local culinary arts students

FORT DRUM, N.Y. – A few weeks after returning from the pressure cooker atmosphere of competition, members of the Fort Drum Culinary Arts Team shared their skills, March 28-30, with culinary students at the Center for Instruction, Technology and Innovation (CiTi) campus, in Mexico, New York.

The students were challenged with creating a competition-style, four-course menu within four hours, and then presenting and serving their cuisine to 40 guests.

Fort Drum Soldiers offered menu suggestions and assisted with the food preparation, while student chefs performed all the duties of a restaurant staff – from executive chef to the dishwashing crew.

“We are here to mentor and counsel the students who are trying to figure out what they want to do, career-wise,” said Sgt. Gianoah Miller, Fort Drum Culinary Arts Team manager. “They are basically getting on-the-job training through this program, and I really love that they have this. When I was in school we had very basic programs, so this is something I would have been very interested in.”

Spc. Frederic Benson said that he appreciated learning the backgrounds of the student chefs – some were seriously pursuing an education in food service, with ambitions of becoming professional chefs and restaurateurs. He said he met one teen who has been baking with his mother since he was 4 and another who enrolled in the culinary arts program simply because she enjoys learning.

“I asked some of them what they want to do after graduating high school,” said Benson, with 3rd Squadron, 71st Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team. “That’s something my teachers would ask me, and at the moment I didn’t know. But when I graduated, I decided to join the Army.”

Benson watched a group of student chefs work on cupcakes, each doing individual tasks but not in a cohesive manner. He decided to huddle them together for a pep talk.

“I tried to explain how important it is to communicate with each member of the team,” he said. “Simple mistakes can be corrected, but they wouldn’t be made at all if the chefs were communicating with each other.

“Before I joined the culinary team, I didn’t know any of that,” he added. “It’s nice being able to share some of that here and touch the young souls who have the heart and talent for cooking.”

Another time, Benson saw a student become frustrated whenever egg shells got into the batter.

“I’ve cracked a lot of eggs and had a lot of egg shells in my batter,” he said. “But then I learned that you crack eggs in one bowl first before putting it into another bowl with the batter. It’s these little things you learn along the way, and I told them that a lot of it is just trial-and-error until they get it right. You’re not going to bake the perfect cupcake on the first try.”

Miller said that after representing Fort Drum and the 10th Mountain Division (LI) at the Joint Culinary Training Event at Fort Lee, Virginia, the culinary team members were excited to share their knowledge with the students.

“They are all trying to figure out what their passion is, so what we can do is share how much we love cooking,” he said. “The culinary arts program (at Fort Drum) is amazing, and I could positively speak volumes about it. It took us out of our comfort zones and taught us upscale, fine-dining cooking. Our team got so much experience from that, and we want to give something back to these students and motivate them.”

Chef Samuel Passer, CiTi culinary instructor, said that it might have been a little intimidating at first for students having Soldiers in their culinary lab, but it wasn’t long before they were working comfortably, side-by-side.

“I think maybe there was some apprehension with new people in their kitchen telling them what to do,” he said. “But once you discover these Soldiers know what they are talking about, and they are essentially teaching out of the goodness of their hearts, to have that here was priceless. It’s not every day you get experienced Army chefs teaching you.”

Passer said the lesson he hoped had a lasting impact on his class was that “move with a purpose” focus essential for cooking under a deadline, which culinary specialists experience daily in the dining facilities.

“Our biggest goal would be to teach the students about sense of urgency,” Passer said. “They don’t know what it means to have speed in the kitchen until given that time crunch. All of the Army chefs brought that sense of urgency, as well as their different outlooks on culinary arts.”

The culinary specialists also gave short demonstrations and talked with students about different techniques they learned during their culinary arts training, such as plating and garnishing.

Passer said that bringing guests into the culinary lab infuses a new energy into the learning and gives students different perspectives. Earlier in March, they welcomed a representative from Wisner Farms to demonstrate how to butcher a whole pig.

“It really enforces what the students are learning, so we welcome those opportunities,” Passer said. “Having the Soldiers here this week was fantastic. We would like to do this more often and build this relationship for the future.”

While the student chefs were hustling plates of food out of the kitchen, Miller managed to grab a few bites for himself.

“They did an excellent job today,” he said. “I think this was a great experience for both the student chefs and for our culinary arts team. They got a chance to see what we do in the Army and how we keep the troops fed. What I think our Soldiers got out of this was some good leadership experience, confidence, and the chance to provide positive mentorship to these young students.”

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Photo Caption: Members of the Fort Drum Culinary Arts Team shared their skills and experience with competition-style cooking with culinary students, March 28-30, at the Center for Instruction, Technology and Innovation (CiTi), in Mexico, New York. The student chefs were tasked with preparing a four-course meal within four hours, and then present and serve their cuisine to 40 guests. The culinary specialists from the 10th Mountain Division (LI) have recently returned from the Joint Culinary Training Event at Fort Lee, Virginia, and they were eager to share their knowledge with the group of talented students. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

A photo gallery is available at [www.flickr.com/photos/drum10thmountain/albums/72177720297763300](http://www.flickr.com/photos/drum10thmountain/albums/72177720297763300).

For further information regarding this release, contact Fort Drum Public Affairs at 315-783-5825 or [katherine.e.wright12.civ@army.mil](mailto:katherine.e.wright12.civ@army.mil)