

Uptown Charlotte camp teaches kids professional culinary skills

By Michael J. Solender

PUBLISHED IN: CITY NEWS

A popular image of kids enjoying summer camp may feature tree climbing, water sports and maybe a mosquito bite or two.

But more than 200 10- to 17-year-olds from Charlotte and points beyond experienced summer camp this July wearing chef's caps and blue-and-white aprons. They were attending a full week in a professional kitchen, courtesy of uptown's Johnson & Wales University.

Chef's Choice Kids Camp celebrated its sixth year under the direction of its creator, Patricia DelBello, culinary operations director at the Charlotte campus of Johnson & Wales.

"We offer two one-week-long programs for children during the summer as part of our year-round recreational cooking instruction that is open to the public," said DelBello.

This summer's classes, offered the second and third weeks of July, have two separate programs. One is focused on fundamental culinary skills and knife training; the other offers instruction in baking and pastries.

Each program is taught by a member of the Johnson & Wales faculty and supported by instructors. Class sizes are small – no more than 15 children in each – and the kids are grouped into teams of similarly aged children.

"We've seen tremendous growth of the program over the past six years," said DelBello. "Some kids are coming back for their third and fourth year, and where we once had two classes with a total of 25 kids, (we now have) 13 classes with more than 200 children.

"So many of our kids develop an interest in culinary

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careers at a very young age. This is a great opportunity for both the kids and parents to see if this is a good alternative going forward.”

Class runs from 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, and the kids prepare their own lunch.

In the culinary program, the kids learn basic knife skills, food safety, sanitation and how to work in a professional kitchen. Each day they prepare a full lunch menu, which may feature such sophisticated dishes as jerk shrimp tostadas or Smithfield ham and cheddar turnovers.

The baking and pastry class exposes the children to the fundamentals of bread making. It has them exploring such treats as brioche, French baguettes and yeast doughnuts.

“I just love coming here,” said Chandler Hunt, a 15-year-old Providence Day School student. “This is my third year, and I hope to have my own bakery one day. We learn lots of great technique and meet all sorts of new people.”

Cydni Baldwin, 15, attended the camp, coming with her parents from Efland between Burlington and Chapel Hill. “The camp has a great reputation, and we’re spending the week here,” said Cydni. “It is fun learning new things and spending an entire week in this tremendous kitchen.”

The kids learn how to use such professional kitchen equipment as convection ovens, large-scale mixers and immersion blenders. They are responsible for cleanup, too, and they all seem to take it in stride.

“These kids are fiery and full of passion,” said Harry Peemoeller, senior baking instructor and acclaimed master baker. “They have grown up in the era of the Food Network and come fully prepared to cook and prepare food at the highest level.”

We’ll be looking for these top chefs in a kitchen near you very soon.

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