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Oakland teens learn culinary arts while battling addictions

OAKLAND



Kevin and Julio are teenagers trying to beat drug and alcohol addictions at Thunder Road, a substance abuse treatment center on the outskirts of downtown Oakland.

As part of their therapy, they are learning about anger management, self worth and pride, and how to deal with issues inside so they can lead successful, productive lives once they are finished with treatment.

But during their stays at the 22-year-old facility, they are also learning how to make a hardy vegetarian lasagna and some mouthwatering chocolate chip cookies under the center's growing culinary arts program.

Now in its seventh year, the cooking program, which has graduated some 6,000 young people, will next month move into a new \$112,000 professional kitchen, where the teens will do the cooking for the first Taste of the East Bay fundraiser event on March 20 at the historic Berkeley City Club.

That means their food, which will include strawberry-glazed baby back ribs over sweet potato chips, bear claw cheesecake, rugelach cookies and polenta with mushroom duxelles, will be on tables alongside international cuisine from East Bay restaurants such as Bucci's, Bakesale Betty's, Havana, Knox and Bay Wolf.

"Being in the kitchen has given me time to think about what I want to do in my recovery," said Julio, 16, of Richmond. Julio, who has been in the Thunder Road recovery program a little more than three weeks, said cooking has helped him refine the mental skills needed to react, without getting flustered or upset, to situations that need immediate attention.



With roots in Guatemala, Julio said he cooked soups, beans and tamales with his mother when he was younger. Now, he's hoping to "not burn anything," and become a better cook to one day start his own restaurant.

"I'm going to go to the (California) Culinary Institute of American so hopefully I can learn a lot there," he said.

It was then that Kevin, 18, of Hayward, chimed in: "You will work for me," joked Kevin, who has been in the program about two months. There is clearly a bond between the young men in their white aprons and chefs hats.



The staff at Thunder Road asked that the Oakland Tribune only identify clients by their first names for the sake of their privacy

Thunder Road is a place to get help for addictions to drugs, alcohol and nicotine, but it's also a place to get an education. More than 20 years ago, Thunder Road opened its doors as an on-site, year-round school, accredited by the state of California and operated by the Alameda County Office of Education.

Clients as young as 13 go to school, participate in family counseling, therapy groups, anger management and relapse prevention classes, 12-step programs, and gender-specific groups. Many also participate in the culinary arts program. They cater about 100 meals weekly for conferences and meetings at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley and Oakland, which runs the program. They also help make the breakfasts, lunches and dinners for staff and other youngsters in the program at the site. That can be 150-180 meals a day, Thunder Road officials said.

"It gives them higher self-esteem that they do have talents," said Loretta Gibeau, who works in environmental services, overseeing food service and maintenance. "Some have been verbally abused all their lives and believe they aren't going to do anything worthwhile. This shows them that they can do things and it gives them positive reinforcement while also getting a nice little (boost) from everyone else about how good the food tastes."

And while the hope is that some will eventually go on to jobs in the restaurant or hotel industry, the skills they are learning in the kitchen now, teens say, are vital to dealing with the problems they are trying to work through. "This program helps you with inner problems. It helps you deal with stuff inside so you can deal with stuff on the outside," Kevin said.

They learn teamwork while whipping up salads for dozens or baking cakes for a birthday; they learn anger management when a dish doesn't quite come out as expected; they learn how to follow rules, clean up after themselves and be safe with knives, hot surfaces; and they learn to respect other chefs in the kitchen, Thunder Road officials and teens said.

"I learn how to discipline myself," Kevin said. "If I make a mess, I have to learn how to clean up after myself."

During eight-week cycles, culinary students attend hands-on cooking labs, visit local restaurant kitchens and bakeries, and prepare most of Thunder Road's meals, snacks and deserts. In 2007, the last year for which data was available, the program more than doubled in size with roughly 56 teens enrolled.

Armando Corpus, the culinary arts director, has worked in the kitchen at Thunder Road for nearly 20 years. He's a Yale University architecture graduate who started working in soup kitchens in his 20s and gravitated to social work after college graduation. He starts each new group with a lecture about food, sanitation, how to carry and clean a knife, and the importance of wearing a hair net. Then he gets down to business. "We usually start with chocolate chip cookies," he said.

Because Thunder Road is the only substance abuse program in Northern California to offer both short-term stays, up to 90 days, and long-term stays, up to a year, Corpus has a chance to work with a teenager for a short or long period of time.

But how ever long the stay, it's going to be a productive one, he said. "They are going to have an experience here that is going to build character," he said. "And no matter what happens after they leave, they are better prepared to deal with their addiction."

Corpus, a marathon runner who has completed more than a dozen 26.2 mile races, has also taught 30 boys how to run and train for races. It builds confidence and strength of character, just like cooking, he said.

And why does a Yale graduate choose this work?

"There's no better place to watch the world go by," he said, adding that the two to three calls a week he gets from former students asking how to make lasagna or needing tips on finding a job in the restaurant business, makes his work even more worthwhile.

When the Thunder Road teens get down to work in their new kitchen next month they will be working in a new catering area with a walk-in cooler, stainless prep tables, new stove and convection oven, 40 quart Hobart stand mixer, pantry, walk-in freezer, and a triple sink. That will be where they will prepare the food for the Taste of the East Bay fundraiser.

Taste of the East Bay will raise funds for scholarships to help youngsters continue their treatment. Through fundraisers, Thunder Road in 2008 provided 235 scholarship "bed days" to teens — a total cost of \$117,500.

Tickets for Taste of the East Bay are \$65 and include food, music, dancing, and a silent auction. The event is from 6 to 9 p.m. March 20 at the Berkeley City Club, 2315 Durant Ave., in Berkeley. Tickets are available at www.absfdn.com or by calling 510-204-1667. Checks should be made payable to the Alta Bates Summit Foundation.