

Serving Caribbean fare with life skills

Restaurant

Students learn by doing as Rochester Youth Culinary Experience opens new restaurant in Village Gate

TRACY SCHUHMACHER

@RAHCHACHOW

Claueshell Davidson's mouth dropped when she first walked into the drab, dirty space that had been used for storage in the Village Gate Square. The East High School student, now a senior, couldn't envision "how in the world" it would become a restaurant that she would help create and run.

But in the year and a half since, that's exactly what transpired. As part of the Rochester Youth Culinary Experience (RYCE), Davidson and her classmates participated in every aspect of creating a new restaurant. They arrived at a concept (Caribbean soul cuisine), tested recipes, helped design the space, learned financials, painted and "did a lot of cleaning — a lot of cleaning," said Davidson.

A nonprofit endeavor, RYCE is a collaboration between Aaron and Kelly Metras, owners of Salena's Mexican Restaurant and part owners of Nox Craft Cocktail Lounge, and the culinary program at East High School. Its goal is to provide Rochester city youths with workforce readiness and entrepreneurial skills.

See RESTAURANT, Page 9A

"They are just as much invested in the game as the adults in the room."

JEFF CHRISTIANO

CULINARY TEACHER AT EAST HIGH SCHOOL



JaVon Jackson, a senior at East High, prepares chicken in the kitchen at the newly opened Rochester Youth Culinary Experience located inside the Village Gate in Rochester. He especially loves it when customers tell him they enjoy his cooking.

SHAWN DOWD/@SDOWDPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Tupelo chicken, served with a side dish and homemade buttermilk biscuits and drizzled with honey, is plated at the newly opened RYCE, whose goal is to provide Rochester city youths with workforce readiness and entrepreneurial skills.

SHAWN DOWD/@SDOWDPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Continued from Page 1A

The program goes well beyond what the students would learn in entry-level restaurant jobs. The three-year program, which spans 11th grade through a year after high school graduation, includes both class work and paid jobs in the restaurant. Participants learn every aspect of the business, from dish washing to management, including administrative tasks like bills, payroll and taxes.

“Nobody takes culinary classes thinking they’ll work for someone else,” said Kelly Metras. Throughout the process, the students were able to recognize that opening and running a business is difficult, time consuming and stressful — “but it can happen,” she said. The experience has clearly rubbed off on some of the students; two could be heard scheming about a food truck they hope to open this summer.

The students’ pride in the restaurant, which opened in early February, is palpable. They discuss the menu with gusto; the jerk chicken (\$15), ropa vieja (\$14) and Tupelo chicken (\$15) are frequent recommendations. The latter is three pieces of fried chicken, drizzled with honey, served with homemade buttermilk biscuits and a side. Side-dish choices include seasoned french fries, mango slaw, rice with Cuban black beans, grilled pineapple and tostones (flattened and fried plantains).

Although the restaurant is open and operating, the nonprofit organization took on \$100,000 in debt to open its doors, and is conducting fundraising activities to defray the debt. Once out of debt, the program plans to pay the students a living wage and to replicate the program to reach more students.

When asked about restaurant’s opening week, both Aaron and Kelly Metras respond with a chuckle. He points out that his restaurants usually are dealing with one or two new employees at a time. The entire staff at RYCE had little to no experience working at restaurants; many had never held jobs. While the quality of food coming out of the kitchen has been good from day one, according to Kelly Metras, mastering the timing required to get finished plates of hot food to a table was trickier.

East High School senior Javon Jackson relishes his current role as a line cook, and especially loves it when customers tell him they enjoy his cooking. During the first week, he learned about time management, communication and working well with people, he said. While working the line can be stressful, “once you get it done it’s a good stress,” he said.

Overall, Aaron and Kelly Metras have been impressed with the 20 students involved in the program. “Their tenacity is awesome,” Kelly Metras said. “Their energy just never subsides.”

As time goes on, the restaurant will run more smoothly as the students will train and pass knowledge to each other as they rotate through the various jobs, as well as to new students coming into the program.

Jeff Christiano has been the culinary teacher at East High School for the past 17 years, and he has wanted to find a way to give students real-world

experience for much of that time. He brims with enthusiasm about the RYCE program. Christiano has augmented the culinary sequence at the high school to dovetail with the RYCE experience. As an example, costing out recipes has been added to the 11th-grade curriculum.

“Real knowledge is being transferred,” he said. He points out two cooks discussing ways they might make the line run more smoothly. “They are just as much invested in the game as the adults in the room.”

As he has helped supervise the opening of the RYCE kitchen, he has marveled at how quickly the adults have been able to begin to step back and students have started to take the reins. “It’s the craziest thing I’ve ever seen,” he said. “It’s exhilarating. This has been the best experience I’ve ever had teaching.”

The ebullient Davidson, who once could not imagine a restaurant in the dreary space, demonstrates similar enthusiasm for the cheerful, colorful restaurant.

“I get out of bed purposely to come to work,” she said. She likes helping people and takes pride in seeing “the nod” when people enjoy the food. She enjoys the comfortable feeling she has developed with the team at the restaurant.

“We want each other to succeed,” she said.

Neither Davidson or Jackson have settled on culinary careers. Davidson has an interest in pursuing cosmetology and psychology after high school. Jackson aspires to study architecture, engineering and business in college. Still, they are excited about all they have learned.

“You learn so much here, it’s ridiculous,” Davidson said. “It’s real life.”

TRACYS@Gannett.com



Claueshell Davidson, a senior at East High, mixes up a fresh batch of sweet tea at the newly opened Rochester Youth Culinary Experience, where she and her classmates participated in every aspect of creating a new restaurant.

SHAWN DOWD/@SDOWDPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Although the restaurant is open and operating, the nonprofit took on \$100,000 in debt to open, and is conducting fundraising activities to defray the debt. Once out of debt, the program plans to pay the students a living wage and to replicate the program to reach more

students.

SHAWN DOWD/@SDOWDPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Tuesday, 02/28/2017 Pag.A01

Copyright © 2017 Democrat and Chronicle 2/28/2017