

HOLYOKE

HCC provides taste of a culinary career

As educational programs go, this one was just a starter. “Un aperitivo,” so to speak.

On the other hand, it also offered more than merely a taste.

The 15 participants, all native Spanish speakers, consumed an entire meal, one they prepared themselves in a commercial kitchen under the guidance of two professional chefs.

Holyoke Community College offered its first-ever, one-day bilingual culinary career exploratory session for clients of two Holyoke nonprofits, Nuestras Raices and the Community Education Project.

The event was held at Mi Plaza Restaurant at Nuestras Raices on Main Street in downtown Holyoke in mid-January. Culinary instruction was handled by Alan Anischik, owner of Food 101 Bar & Bistro in South Hadley, and Neftali Duran, the chef at Nuestras Raices.

The exploratory sessions will be free to participants and funded by a state grant from the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund awarded to HCC through the Commonwealth Corporation.

Kermit Dunkelberg, the college’s assistant vice president of adult basic education and workforce development, said the objective of the program is to raise awareness in the Latino community about education and training programs in the hospitality and culinary industry.

“It’s about exposure and awareness. This is very entry level,” said Dunkelberg. “We’re hoping people will have a good time, that they’ll feel comfortable because it’s bilingual, and they’ll at least be informed about opportunities we have for training and education. Maybe somebody will be inspired to take a further step.”

Those further steps could include enrolling in one of the college’s noncredit culinary arts and hospitality workforce training programs, English

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Hilda Roque

as a Second Language or HiSet (high school equivalency) classes, or even HCC’s for-credit hospitality management and culinary arts degree and certificate programs. Those programs will be moving from the main campus to the new Hospitality and Culinary Arts Center, once that facility opens downtown on nearby Race Street later this year.

For the day’s exploratory session, participants were divided into two groups: one worked in the kitchen, cooking; the other worked in the dining area, learning about customer service and front-of-the-house operations from instructor Julie Turgeon. The groups switched halfway through.

“They’re going to cook something, they’re going to serve something, they’re going to sit down and eat it,” said Dunkelberg, “and while they’re eating we will be telling them about the other training programs that we have.”

In the kitchen, Anischik, who teaches many of HCC’s noncredit culinary classes, taught students the proper – and sanitary – way to cut vegetables and meat. The menu for the day: sautéed chicken breast on a bed of rice along with a side salad.

Miriam Gonzalez, a 69-year-old Springfield resident from Puerto Rico, said she was looking to improve her knife skills. Right now, she is working as a certified nursing assistant in Ludlow, but is



Chef Alan Anischik leads a bilingual culinary career training seminar in the restaurant kitchen at Nuestras Raices in Holyoke.



Miriam Gonzalez picks oregano leaves off a fresh stem.

interested in taking classes at HCC. She said she passed her high school equivalency test in October.

“I want to go to the college,” she said.

Hilda Roque, executive director for Nuestras Raices, which focuses on community gardening, said some of the participants have already taken part in “Empresario Comunidad,” a community entrepreneurship program that teaches basic financial management skills.

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Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal welcomes participants to the culinary career exploration session jointly offered by the college with Nuestras Raices as Hilda Roque, executive director of Nuestras Raices, translates her remarks into Spanish. (HCC PHOTO)

Roque said, “so that’s why this partnership today means a lot.”

Rose Egan, executive director of the Community Education Project, which offers ESL and other adult basic education classes, agreed.

“We are very excited to be able to team with Nuestras

Raices and Holyoke Community College to offer our students greater opportunities and more options to be fully embedded in the community. We look forward to more collaborations in the future.”

Dunkelberg said the sessions proved so popular they will likely be offered again.