

## HOLYOKE

# HCC culinary students back in kitchen

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After a seven-month closure, the teaching kitchens are open again at Holyoke Community College.

Seven culinary arts students are back in business with accelerated, back-to-back classes designed to catch them up before the spring semester begins on Jan. 25, 2021. The kitchens reopened for in-person learning on Oct. 28.

They had been closed since first-semester schedules were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic in March. That came just after they had completed their seven-week introductory cooking course, Culinary Fundamentals I, and were scheduled to start Culinary Fundamentals II after spring break.

When the campus shut down, so did the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute as the college transitioned to remote instruction, which is still how the large majority of learning is taking place.

Food preparation is difficult if not nearly impossible to learn remotely, so the students' first semesters were put on hold until the fall. The accelerated program is aimed at getting them back on schedule.

"It's definitely exciting to get back in the kitchen into a somewhat normal routine, doing what I love and learning," said Monica Hernandez, a student from Westfield who is enrolled in the culinary arts class.

The class completed what would typically be a seven-week course, Culinary Fundamentals II, in less than three weeks. That wrapped up their delayed first semester and put them back on schedule for an associate of science



**Chef Warren Leigh samples vegetable rice prepared by student Caroline Ortiz of Agawam.** (HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PHOTO)

degree in culinary arts.

The reconfigured second semester began on Nov. 16. Students are well into their Pantry and Garde Manager course, which will be followed immediately by Stocks, Soups and Sauces.

"Classes are very fast-paced," Hernandez said.

During the college's 10-day program in January, students will be in the kitchen Monday through Friday, from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. In those two weeks, they will complete two classes, Baking and Pastry Arts, and Entrée Preparation and Presentation.

All HCC classes that meet in person must be approved by the college's Return to Campus Task Force.

"Just like in Health Sciences, everybody with labs — we've all had to rethink how we're running our classes," chef and culinary arts professor Warren Leigh said.

"They said, think outside the box. Well, we did. As long as everything keeps going the way it is, we're going to be done with semester two on January 15, and they'll be ready to join some of the other

students for semester three classes in the spring."

In addition to the fast-track schedule, other accommodations were made, such as reducing the number of students in each section.



**Monica Hernandez of Westfield pan-sears a chicken breast during her Culinary Fundamentals II class at Holyoke Community College, where cooking classes are in-person again for the first time in seven months.** (HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE)

"We can really do six to seven, but we're keeping it at six moving forward," Leigh said.

"The six stations are perfect for social distancing and (other considerations). All the classes set up for winter and spring we're capping at six,

knowing that nothing is going to be normal for a while."

General precautions around health and safety have been elevated in and around the kitchen on account of COVID-19.

"We get our temperatures taken as we walk in the building. Multiple-stall restrooms are now single-use only. We can only use the dish room one at a time," Hernandez said.

"We have assigned stations. We use the same dishes for every class, and we wash them ourselves so each of us has contact only with the dishes we use every day.

"We are a lot more mindful of personal space, contact and germs. We wash our hands frequently. I find myself washing my hands a lot more."

Masks are mandatory. That does make it more difficult to be heard and understood in a

busy commercial kitchen.

"Wearing the mask has really proved that we need a 'kitchen voice' to be able to talk to each other. It's really important to pay attention and listen closely," Hernandez said.