

# YOUNG BAKERS AT WORK



Above, Ella Hendricks, 11, center, and Zinna Greene, 13, left, watch as Rebecca Masotti, 12, right, weighs flour during a youth baking class at Holyoke Community College.



At right, Jasmine Hooper, 14, of Westfield, works on a chocolate cake.

Staff Photos by Andy Castillo

## Children learn advanced techniques to whip up confections at Holyoke Community College

By **ANDY CASTILLO**  
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A sweet smell of baked goods lingered in Holyoke Community College's culinary kitchen Thursday as 10 children carefully squeezed spongy batter from pastry bags into narrow strips on a sheet pan, the final step in a tedious process required to make lady fingers, a traditional Italian dessert biscuit.

Lady fingers are a challenge for inexperienced bakers, said Pastry Chef Maureen Benton, a teacher at the school. The batter has to be whipped to a precise consistency so that the biscuits won't collapse, she said. And it needs to be squeezed into strips that are almost touching one another, so

they can rise, she explains, but not too close, as they need to be separate from one another.

"If it does collapse, you'll have really flat lady fingers instead of fluffy lady fingers," she told the students as they worked at stainless steel tables.

Making lady fingers was the last of a variety of baking projects the 12 to 14 year-olds tackled during the week-long course. They also made gelatin parfaits, ice cream bombs, truffles, pudding, various types of decorated cookies, cakes, petite fours, chocolate mousse and macaroons, all mostly from scratch.

The classes were hosted by Holyoke Community College's culinary arts program at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute on Race Street in Holyoke. MGM has its name on the building because the company made a large donation to the culinary school, which paid

for a new baking lab where the youth class was being held, according to Chris Yurko, a spokesman for the college.

The class, which was designed for intermediate bakers, introduced the students to nuanced baking techniques such as flipping crepes, which are delicate and can easily break. It started with frozen confections and ended with cake decorating. The lessons built on another class that Benton taught the previous week, which was designed for beginners.

### Measuring and mixing

Inside the Race Street kitchen, the high-pitched whir of electric mixers could be heard above exhaust fans. At one table, Lydia Fiorini, 14, of Palmer,



At left, Amalia Rodrigues, 12, of Longmeadow, pours batter for a chocolate cake during the baking class.



## Salad



SARA MOULTON  
by Sara Moulton.

...ile, in a shallow  
...plate beat the egg;  
...termilk and whisk  
...ined well. In a sep-  
...low bowl stir to-  
...e cornmeal, flour,  
...¼ teaspoon salt.  
...large tomatoes dry  
...towels. Coat half of  
...the buttermilk mix-  
...g the excess drip  
...n dip them in the  
...mixture making  
...e coated all over.  
...onstick skillet heat  
...ons of the oil over  
...gh heat. Add the  
...atoes and cook  
...golden, about 2  
...side. Transfer 2  
...ach of two plates.  
...e procedure with  
...ing tomato slices,  
...mixture, cornmeal  
...ad transfer those  
...two more plates.

## Youth baking class

FROM C1

cleaned a mixing bowl that she'd just used to make a chocolate cake earlier in the class, and weighed flour and sugar on a scale — another baking skill taught by Benton for more precise ingredient measurements — to make batter for the lady fingers.

"I really like how it's a combination of science and art," Fiorini said. "The science is in the baking, and the art is in the decorating." Fiorini said she often bakes at home, inspired by her mother, who worked as a professional baker at Atkins Farms in Amherst. She particularly enjoyed the cake-decorating portion of the course, she said. "It's been a really good experience. It's good to have instruction."

Each class began with a lesson by Benton followed by a chance for the students to put what they learned into practice.

"A lot of them have experience baking at home. I'm refining the skills they already have," Benton said, noting, "it's very gratifying, seeing the progress they make, and their expressions when they see something beautiful they've made."

Fiorini said that baking alongside peers is helpful as everyone has a different approach and students pick up techniques from one another.

Across the table, Zinna Greene, 13, of South Hadley, carefully squeezed batter out onto a sheet pan. As she worked, she praised Benton's teaching method, which is mostly hands-off. "She gives us instruction but we still get to do a lot of stuff on our own," she said.

ton. Benton said that teaching youngsters to bake reminds her of why she chose to enter the restaurant industry.

"I baked a lot with my parents. I cooked a lot with my dad, and baked a lot with my mom. It puts you in this happy comfort place," she said. "I love to make people happy, and the best way to do that is through their stomach. There's something about the joy that it brings."

And for the students, the challenging class provided a chance to improve their baking skills, and follow in the footsteps of their own role models who've encouraged them along the way. For Masotti, that means taking her mother's path which could lead to professional baking. "She really inspires me because everything she makes is so good," Masotti said. "I want to be like her."

Following are two of the recipes the students made.

**Chocolate Cake**

1 cup sugar  
¾ cups and 2 tablespoons  
all purpose flour  
6 tablespoons cocoa  
1 teaspoon baking soda  
½ teaspoon baking powder  
½ teaspoon salt  
1 egg  
½ cup buttermilk  
½ cup strong black coffee  
¼ cup vegetable oil  
½ teaspoon vanilla extract

Stir together flour, cocoa, baking soda, baking powder, and salt in large bowl. Add eggs, buttermilk, coffee, oil, and vanilla. Beat on medium speed of mixer for 2 minutes. Pour batter evenly into prepared pans. Bake 30 to 35 minutes in round pan.

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drizzle with  
ssing.

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27 g fat (5 g  
ns fats); 55  
377 mg  
ohydrate; 4  
8 g protein.

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said.

Working next to Greene, Rebecca Masotti, 12, of Westfield, described the classroom environment as upbeat, adding that Benton is patient with students.

"Whenever anyone makes a mistake, it's not a big deal," she said.

At the end of each day, the students sampled their desserts, still hot from the oven, and took home leftovers.

"We made souffles yesterday, which is a very complicated, fancy, high-end dessert," Benton said. "I wanted them all to see how it came out, so we made two versions, a big version to take home, and a small version they could eat right away."

Benton has a cooking degree from the New England Culinary Institute, and worked as a baker at the Publick House in Sturbridge for 11 years. In addition to teaching classes, she now bakes full-time at Williston School in Easthamp-

## Lady Fingers

*(Ingredients are measured by weight, as they are in Benton's class)*

6 ounces egg yolks  
3 ounces sugar  
9 ounces egg whites  
5 ounces sugar  
¼ teaspoon lemon juice  
10 ounces pastry flour

Place egg whites in a mixer with whip attachment. Beat till soft peaks form, then slowly sprinkle in sugar. Continue to mix until firm peaks form. In a new bowl, with whip attachment, mix the egg yolks and remaining sugar. Whip til pale and thick.

Fold by hand, half of the egg whites into the egg yolks. Be gentle so you do not collapse the eggs. Fold in the flour and lemon juice. Fold in the remaining egg whites. Put in a pastry bag with a large round tip. Pipe four-inch long fingers side by side, almost touching. Bake eight minutes until they're firm to the touch and spring back.

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# Wines for BBQ