

HOLYOKE

HCC culinary teacher lands Educator of the Year honors

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Special to The Republican

While his peers were outside playing baseball and sliding into home plate, Warren Leigh was at home, learning how to present food on a plate.

From the time he was 12, Leigh knew he wanted to be a chef. Back then, he and his father — an Army intelligence officer — spent their Sundays listening to opera on a reel-to-reel tape player while they cooked together.

At 14, when he was in France with his family, he and his father took a two-week course in wine tasting. Along with both parents, he attended classes at the former La Varenne cooking school in Paris. That was how they vacationed, and dined, in Europe.

Leigh went on to attend the Lausanne Hotel School in Lausanne, Switzerland. He eventually received his bachelor's degree in food service

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Holyoke Community College instructor and chef Warren Leigh, right, with culinary arts student Sherleymary Santiago of Springfield. Leigh has been named an Educator of the Year by a culinary industry group.

HCC offers free line cook training courses for fall

Holyoke Community College will be running three sessions of its free line-cook training program this fall at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute.

The first of two daytime sessions begins Sept. 18 and runs five days a week through Oct. 20. The classes are held Mondays from 9 a.m. to noon, and Tuesday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

Concurrently, an evening program, from 5 to 9:30 p.m., also begins Sept. 18 and runs Mondays through Thursdays until Nov. 9.

A second daytime session begins Oct. 30 and runs five days a week through Dec. 8. Likewise, these classes are held Mondays from 9 a.m. to noon, and Tuesday through

Friday, from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

The line-cook program is designed for those already in the restaurant industry who want to upgrade their skills, as well as unemployed or underemployed people interested in starting a new career.

“We usually have a mix of young people entering the job market for the first time, and people who are re-entering the job market and looking for a second career,” said Maureen McGuinness, assistant project coordinator for HCC’s noncredit, culinary arts programs. “The course is perfect for anybody who’s looking for a job and has a passion for food and the dining industry.”

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Chef Warren Leigh, center, with students at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute.

Teacher

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administration from Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, along with a master's degree in management and organizational culture from the University of Phoenix.

These days, Leigh is the one teaching the classes, as a professor at Holyoke Community College's Culinary Arts program.

When *The Republican* recently caught up with him, he was instructing his students on some of the basics — how heat interacts with proteins.

"Protein reacts to heat molecules, and then if you stop supporting the heat — if you turn it off — they stop marching forward. Suddenly, there's nothing behind them, and the reaction stops," Leigh says.

It might sound like a science class of sorts, and it is — the chemistry of cooking. "We make sure students understand as much of the fundamentals as possible," says Leigh, a professional chef and restaurateur who has taught at the college for 15 years.

Honored by peers

It is his attention to detail and dedication to students that earned him Educator of the Year honors from the Center for the Advancement of Food Service Education, also known as CAFE. He accepted the award from CAFE recently at a national conference in South Carolina.

A friend and fellow chef nominated Leigh, and a former student — Matthew Enos — supported the nomination with a statement to the award committee. Enos began his career as a dishwasher at a casual dining restaurant, before becoming sous chef at John-

ny's Bar and Grill in South Hadley. He credits Leigh for helping to launch his career.

"He's a very good teacher. He's stern but not strict. If you make a mistake, he doesn't tear you down. He's very constructive with his criticism, very knowledgeable. He has little tips and tricks that you don't think would make a big difference, but they do," says Enos.

Former owner, operator

After Leigh graduated, the future HCC professor landed in Southern New England, owning and operating everything from casual to fine dining restaurants in greater Hartford and Springfield.

Leigh likens being a head chef in a high-end restaurant to performing on stage.

"You're one person on a stage, entertaining thousands of people," he says. "When I would watch cooking shows, I wanted to learn how they did their cooking."

His cosmopolitan life has influenced his approach to cooking — there is an international influence on what he prepares. While he teaches the basics — like how to use a knife and plate dishes — he also encourages students to use recipes as guides, not rules.

Leigh believes the basics of basting, blanching and pan searing are universal, yet living abroad and tasting life somewhere else has made his cooking unique. And learning how to improvise in the kitchen is an acquired taste, and talent, he says.

"Once you know the basics, you start feeling confident. You can put that piece of paper to the side. You have your ingredients in front of you. Now cook. As you understand the method of preparations, you learn how to swap in-

gredients around, you learn what things go well together, and you only do that by tasting a lot of things," he says.

Leigh tells his students a great meal with an unsavory presentation can disappoint, while so-so cooking can please if food on the plate looks great. It's all about making a great first impression, the chef says.

A promise kept

In his 30s and 40s, Leigh made a promise to himself — and the next generation of chefs — that he would leave the restaurant business and begin teaching when he turned 50. That's when he joined the HCC faculty.

Being named Educator of the Year and receiving kudos from his peers is a highlight of Leigh's career, but he says what defines success is when he hears from students a decade after they graduate. Whether they want to chat over coffee about owning a cafe, or the higher order of working in a high-end restaurant, Leigh says he loves it when students come home.

"What you like the best is when your students still reach out to you 10 years later. That's pretty rewarding. As a teacher, I try to help my students be successful and confident," he says.

Leigh says he loves to cook by the heat of a wood-fired oven, and while he's not hot on cooking with gas, he thinks cooking with charcoal is cool, too.

He also appreciates everything from homemade meals to fine dining, and doesn't always insist on white-glove treatment.

"My wife and I don't go crazy all the time," says Leigh. "Last night, it was burgers on the grill."