

Exquisite dishes — with a side of character — at Thunder Road

Teens learn culinary arts while dealing with addictions in Oakland treatment program

By Kristin Bender
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — Kevin and Julio are teenagers trying to beat drug and alcohol addictions at Thunder Road, a substance abuse treatment center on the outskirts of downtown Oakland.

As part of their therapy, they are learning about anger management, self worth and pride and how to deal with issues inside so they can lead successful, productive lives once they are finished with treatment.

But during their stays at the 22-year-old facility, they are also learning how to make a hearty vegetarian lasagna and some mouthwatering chocolate chip cookies under the center's growing culinary arts program.

Now in its seventh year, the cooking program, which has graduated some 6,000 young people, will next month move into a new \$112,000 professional kitchen, where the teens will do the cooking for the first Taste of the East Bay fundraiser event on March 20 at the historic Berkeley City Club.

That means their food, which will include strawberry-glazed baby back ribs over sweet potato chips, bear claw cheesecake, rugelach cookies and polenta with mushroom duxelles, will be on tables alongside international cuisine from East Bay restaurants such as Bucci's, Bakesale Betty's, Havana, Knox and Bay Wolf.

"Being in the kitchen has

given me time to think about what I want to do in my recovery," said Julio, 16, of Richmond. Julio, who has been in the Thunder Road recovery program a little more than three weeks, said cooking has helped him refine the mental skills needed to react, without getting flustered or upset, to situations that need immediate attention.

With roots in Guatemala, Julio said he cooked soups, beans and tamales with his mother when he was younger. Now, he's hoping to "not burn anything," and become a better cook to one day start his own restaurant.

"I'm going to go to the (California) Culinary Institute of America so hopefully I can learn a lot there," he said.

The staff at Thunder Road asked that the Oakland Tribune only identify clients by their first names for the sake of their privacy. Thunder Road is a place to get help for addictions to drugs, alcohol and nicotine, but it's also a place to get an education. More than 20 years ago, Thunder Road opened its doors as an on-site, year-round school, accredited by the state of California and operated by the Alameda County Office of Education.

Clients as young as 13 go to school, participate in family counseling, therapy groups, anger management and relapse prevention classes, 12-step programs, and gender-specific groups.

Many also participate in the culinary arts program. They cater about 100 meals weekly for conferences and meetings at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley and Oakland, which runs the program.

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— Julio, 16, of Richmond, cooking program student

They also help make the breakfasts, lunches and dinners for staff and other youngsters in the program at the site. That can be 150-180 meals a day, Thunder Road officials said.

"It gives them higher self-esteem that they do have talents," said Loretta Gibeau, who works in environmental services, overseeing food service and maintenance. "Some have been verbally abused all their lives and believe they aren't going to do anything worthwhile. This shows them that they can do things and it gives them positive reinforcement while also getting a nice little (boost) from everyone else about how good the food tastes."

And while the hope is that some will eventually go on to jobs in the restaurant or hotel industry, the skills they are learning in the kitchen now, teens say, are vital to dealing with the problems they are trying to work through.

"This program helps you with inner problems. It helps you deal with stuff inside so you can deal with stuff on the outside," Kevin, 18, said.

They learn teamwork while whipping up salads for dozens or baking cakes for a birthday;

INSTRUCTOR HARVEY SMITH, left, works Wednesday with Kevin, a client at the Culinary Academy at Thunder Road, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Oakland.

they learn anger management when a dish doesn't quite come out as expected; they learn how to follow rules, clean up after themselves and be safe with knives, hot surfaces; and they learn to respect other chefs in the kitchen, Thunder Road officials and teens said.

"I learn how to discipline myself," Kevin said. "If I make a mess, I have to learn how to clean up after myself."

Armando Corpus, the culinary arts director, has worked

in the kitchen at Thunder Road for nearly 20 years. He's a Yale University architecture graduate who started working in soup kitchens in his 20s and gravitated to social work after college graduation. He starts each new group with a lecture about food, sanitation, how to carry and clean a knife, and the importance of wearing a hair net.

Then he gets down to business.

"We usually start with chocolate chip cookies," he said.

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