

RhodyBeat ⁽¹⁾

Tides Restaurant is a recipe for learning

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By **Ethan Hartley**

Warwick Area Career and Technical Center culinary arts students will soon be putting their skills to the test in front of members of the local community, as the Tides Restaurant is set and ready for a grand opening ceremony on March 7 from 3 to 5 p.m., with a ribbon cutting at 3:30 p.m.

"This is an opportunity not only for the community to come in and see the great work that's coming out of the high school, but it's also a great opportunity for the high school students to get real experience and engage with the community," said Eva Niosi, baking instructor for the culinary arts program.

The café and restaurant will operate Wednesdays through Fridays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. until June 1, and those who want to stop by must make an appointment beforehand – as the tech center must be mindful of the amounts of ingredients it purchases and uses. Reservations can be made by calling 734-3161.

While the facility is located on the grounds of Toll Gate High School, and is attached to the working kitchen within the tech center, it does not function as a traditional restaurant, and won't be a place where Toll Gate students can hang out and order a coffee. It is a teaching tool that gives students in the culinary arts program the chance to cook for and interact with real customers and gain skills necessary to the hospitality industry.

Those skills go much further than simply cooking something delicious, according to instructor Ray Depot.

"Everybody rotates through every position," Depot said. "They'll spend one week in bake shop, one week in culinary, and within that you're also rotated through the dining room, all the way down to washing pots and pans and dishes. If you want to be in charge someday, you'll have to have done all the jobs."

"We always tell the kids we never ask them to do something we haven't done ourselves," agreed Niosi. "Whether it's get on the floor and scrape up gum that somebody left or clean a toilet or wash a dish or frost a cake, any of those things you're going to have to do as hopefully a business owner one day or a restaurant manager."

Both instructors talked about how valuable a technical education is for kids, as it teaches them a valuable trade skill that will be useful no matter what career they may wind up in, and can provide in-roads with higher educational facilities – like Johnson and Wales, the Culinary Institute of America, the Art Institute of Philadelphia, Kendall College in Chicago and the New England Culinary Institute.

However a technical education also teaches students life skills that can't be accurately taught by sitting in a classroom.

"You can't teach real-time interaction either," said Warwick Area Career and Tech Center director Bill McCaffrey. "This gives us an opportunity to teach real time interaction."

Depot said that the new Tides Restaurant – which has been a concept some 17 years in the making, and replaces the former, much smaller facility located inside the tech center – has already brought out the best in his students.

"Even yesterday we had our kids in here for their first real interactive with the dining room procedures, and I really feel that, even just because they were in here, they were more well behaved and more respectful of the professionalism," he said.

Students are graded on those types of skills, which Depot called "employability skills," and these generally relate to attendance and the attitude they display while performing tasks or going through the classroom elements of their technical education.

"Attendance is big in the hospitality industry, because nobody's going to be there if you're not," Depot said. "We stress that, if you don't go to work you don't get paid, so if you don't come to school you don't get a grade. That's how we do it."

"But when a kid really loves this program, they don't miss a day," added Niosi. "They'll look for ways to stay late or show up early."

McCaffrey, Depot and Niosi talked about the potential for the restaurant to be a hosting location for various types of events around Warwick, including municipal meetings or board meetings from groups such as the Warwick Rotary Club or Chamber of Commerce.

Niosi said that groups should feel extra compelled to host their meetings at the restaurant, and not only because of its negotiable prices or the fact that those expenses go directly into funding the budget for the culinary arts program.

"There's not many meeting spaces you can come into and have a Promethean Board at your fingertips with surround sound mic capabilities so you direct your meeting from your screen, have your audience right in front of you and be fed," she said. "And you're giving back, because you're giving the kids the opportunity to get the experience they need to grow their skills."

Niosi and Depot hope the restaurant will help highlight a refocused effort on technical education and increase enrollment – which currently sits at just 33 culinary arts students – and, in the long run, help change the stubbornly negative connotation that seems to accompany vocational programs.

"I think the mindset is so skewed on 'Not my kid, my kid is going to college,' and it's completely the opposite," Niosi said. "Yeah, I hope my kid goes to college, but if not, he's going to have a solid foundation for something when he gets out of here. And hopefully it's something he loves, and that he learned for free. Before I spend all this money on college and he decides, 'I don't want to do that.'"

Depot and Niosi have a combined 65 years of experience in the hospitality industry between them, and Depot said he wound up becoming an instructor so he could pass on the benefits of getting a technical education to the younger generations.

"My secondary education wasn't great," he said. "I wanted to be able to help out the kids who may be having those same kind of situations so they didn't have one as bad as I did and give them an avenue to go down. I try to be hard on them, because nobody was hard on me when I was in high school, but I also try show them the value of actually working with your hands."

Niosi said that experiencing the feeling of pride students have for their work as they progress within the program is what she loves the most about being an instructor.

"It's very scientific. It's kind of like a mental program as much as it a creative one, and I like that," she said. "I like seeing the students get it and make the connection, and sometimes even thinking they couldn't do it, and then all of the sudden the skills you've built into them flourish and you're like, 'You did it!' and they're like 'I did that!'"

The 104-seat facility was designed by Cranston-based Saccoccio & Associates, built by Warwick-based E.W. Burman and includes installed pieces from Kittredge Equipment Company of Massachusetts.

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