

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

AT SCHOOL WITH NEW YORK'S NEXT TOP CHEF, OR LINE COOK

Professional chefs volunteer to teach at city's only public school focused on culinary arts

By Leslie Brody
April 23, 2018

A few hours before chef Anthony Sasso made picci pasta for customers at La Sirena in Manhattan one night, he showed a cluster of teenagers how to roll the fat spaghetti by hand, much like his grandmother used to do.

"What should your pasta water taste like?" he quizzed them.

"Salty," a student answered. "Like the sea."

Mr. Sasso is one of dozens of professional chefs who have volunteered to teach an after-school class on Wednesdays at Food and Finance High School, the city's only public school focused on culinary arts. Almost all of its nearly 400 students are poor and black or Hispanic, according to city data. Many see its training as a recipe for a better life.

A 36-year-old with a menu tattooed on his forearm, Mr. Sasso once brought in half a pig to show the students how to butcher it. He hopes to prove there are promising futures in the field if they persist beyond entry-level jobs – a lesson he didn't know when he was their age, so he became an accountant and hated it.

After starting culinary school, he said, he "realized you could make a living this way and it's much more satisfying than auditing people."

Jahquay Austin, a senior with his own cookie business who is heading to the Culinary Institute of America in the fall, said the visiting chef series "gives us an extra push of creativity and opens our minds."

About 40 percent of the high school's graduates join the industry, often as cooks, produce buyers or food stylists, its officials say. One star alum is Lazarus Lynch, a soul food chef and champion of the "Chopped" competition on Food Network.

The school's supporters hope it will develop a pipeline of talent. Restaurateurs say they face a shortage of workers due to the job's long hours, low starting wages, the high cost of city housing and fears of deportation among the undocumented.

A gala last month raised \$225,000 for the school. A dinner for 10 whipped up by Tom Colicchio, a judge on the reality television show "Top Chef," was auctioned for \$11,000. And a new cookbook, "Crossing Borders," is coming out Tuesday, with recipes from city chefs and profits promised to the school.

Opened in 2004 in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, Food and Finance High School is part of a push for career and technical education in New York City and nationwide. The school had a

91 percent four-year graduation rate last spring, well above the city's 74 percent rate, by city data. About 1,800 applicants sought about 110 spots for last fall.

There have been frustrations along the way. Nan Shipley, chair of the school's nonprofit board, said that in the summer of 2016, a city maintenance project accidentally cut a gas line so five of the six kitchens weren't working for most of the fall. Students couldn't cook or bake.

A spokesman for the Education Department, Douglas Cohen, said that as soon as it learned of the problem, "we worked diligently to complete the repairs as quickly as possible."

Last Wednesday, 14 students in white jackets and chef hats gathered around a metal kitchen table at the school to learn from Mr. Sasso. He poured hot water over fresh mozzarella so students could squish chunks of cheese into balls.

"It's not 'Yo, chef,'" a junior warned a freshman. "It's 'Yes, chef.'"

They used basil grown in the school's rooftop hydroponics laboratory, which also has kale, chard and lettuce. Some of its vegetables are sold to the retailer Fresh & Co. Through a partnership with Cornell University, students learn about sustainable food production by raising tilapia, shrimp and lobster in giant vats in the basement.

Jaylen Downer is a senior who woke up at 4:30 a.m. daily during his paid internship last fall to be a prep cook at Maialino restaurant. He hopes for a career in food science. "I want to build new technologies that make chefs' lives easier," he said.