

Validating culinary expertise

ProChef program gives non-commercial chefs the chance to prove—and improve—their cooking and management skills.

HYDE PARK, NY—Stephen Hickman and Master Sergeant Scott Wilde come from similar culinary backgrounds. Hickman, executive chef at Hillsdale (MI) Community Health Center, calls himself an “old school” chef, learning his culinary skills on his own and alongside other chefs over the years as he worked in hotels and private clubs. Wilde is just someone who loved to work in the kitchen, even as a child, and so when he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps he became a cook.

The two men share another commonality: both have earned certification through ProChef, a fairly new program conducted by the Culinary Institute of America in cooperation with the American Culinary Federation. Last year, Hickman became the first chef to pass the Level III certification exam, the highest level in ProChef. Earlier this year, Wilde attained Level I certification. He says he hopes to reach Level II in the next two years.

Robert Briggs, C.H.E., assistant director of continuing education at the CIA and head of the ProChef program, explains that ProChef was conceived about four years ago as another way to provide chefs with continuing education and certification.

Raising the bar: “Chefs have always been able to be certified by the ACF,” says Briggs. “But we wanted to create something that was more intense and more detailed, to raise chefs’ skills even

further.”

CIA teamed with ACF to develop three levels of certification, each achieved through a rigorous, five-day exam administered at the CIA’s campus here. Since the program was inaugurated in 2003, more than 200 chefs have passed at least one of the exams. Four chefs have achieved Level III certification.

Level I focuses on basic culinary techniques such as knife skills, egg cookery and stock preparation, along with tests in the basics of food safety, nutrition, culinary math and costing. Level II deals with garde manger, baking and pastry skills, and tests students’ knowledge of Mediterranean and healthy cuisine. Level III assesses chefs’ knowledge of wine, personnel management and the cuisines of Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia.

When a chef applies, he or she is assigned an advisor from the CIA faculty, who aids the chef in preparing for the exam. In some cases the chef can take a three-week “immersion” course at the CIA in order to get ready for the exam.

The exam itself stretches over five days, with the bulk of the test taking place in the kitchen. Chefs are judged in every aspect of their day, from how their preparations look and taste to how neat they keep their work stations and how prepared they are with ingredients and uten-

sils before they begin cooking. Written exams, usually consisting of about 20 multiple-choice questions, test chefs’ knowledge of such things as nutrition and the history of some menu items and cuisines.

Keeping it real: “We really try to guide the students as much as possible,” says Mark Ainsworth, a CIA chef-instructor. “We want them to succeed. At the same time, we want to make sure they know that they can do this stuff on a day-to-day basis. We try to make [the exam] as close to real kitchen work as possible.”

Seeing the exam in action, the casual observer might mistake it for everyday food preparation. But the chefs know they are being timed, and the white-coated people walking around with clipboards and taking notes aren’t there to steal recipe ideas.

Wilde, the Marine, recalls the exam as being nerve-wracking. “The hardest thing for me was getting everything done in a two-and-a-half-hour time period,” he says. “Normally, doing up four plates wouldn’t be hard, but knowing you’re being timed and watched will make you a little nervous.”

Hickman calls the exam “very challenging. It forces you to study things that you may not ordinarily have a need to, or an opportunity to, study,” he says. “At the same time, you also get to try a lot of new things. It broadens your knowledge base.



Terry Howard, executive chef for the Country Club of Spartanburg, in Roswell, GA, chops red peppers as he works on the healthy cuisine portion of the exam.

The program made me more valuable as a chef and opened doors to new cuisines.”

Wilde says that although Level I might appear to cover the basics, he still came away with a wealth of information even though he’s been a chef for 22 years.

“For example, some of the soups we were asked to prepare, such as beef consommé, are ones I don’t make on a daily basis, so practicing with them has raised my confidence level in that area,” Wilde explains.

Got back-up: Wilde and Hickman agree that the pro-

gram was worth the time and effort. “I know a lot about cooking, but I wanted to be able to back up what I can do with a certificate,” says Wilde. “So this gives me the recognition I might need to work in the industry after I get out of the Marines in the next year or two.”

“Being certified validates all the knowledge I’ve picked up over the years,” adds Hickman. “I’m recognized now as an educated culinarian, and with the certification, I can go anywhere [in the industry].”