

April 12, 2007

Cookin' in the halls of power - City Tech chefs shine bright

In its 60-year history, the hospitality management program at New York City College of Technology (City Tech) has earned a reputation for producing top chefs for some of the world's greatest restaurants, but 2007 will go down in the review books as a five-star year.



That's because a pair of chefs with City Tech credentials—one an alumnus, one still a student—are working in two of the most famous kitchens in the country—at the White House and at Gracie Mansion in New York City.

Bill Yosses, who graduated in 1982, got the sweet job in January when Laura Bush asked him to step in as the presidential pastry chef. The news hit the national wires, serving up scoops of culinary-culled headlines like "Pastry Chef Joining the Upper Crust."

That same month Feliberto Estevez—who has four more classes to complete before earning his associate degree—also found himself in the spotlight. Mayor Michael Bloomberg appeared at City Tech for his annual State of the City Address, and His Honor let it be known that City Tech was close to his heart, that's to say, his stomach.

Advertisement

Bloomberg told the gathering that City Tech "has one of the finest hospitality management programs in the nation" and that student Estevez, as the executive chef, "happens to be the most important man at Gracie Mansion." He then joked, "I think I get to eat his final exam, so I hope he does well." Estevez has been cooking for mayoral events ever since Bloomberg was elected in 2002.

The recipe for the successes of Yosses and Estevez? Each gives much credit to an essential ingredient: City Tech.

For 53-year-old Yosses, City Tech offered a chance to change careers in mid-life. Born and raised in Toledo, Ohio, he says, "dinnertime was sacred. My mother loved to cook and bake recipes from magazines."

There was something about baking that was good for his spirit, Yosses said. But in his twenties and early thirties, he found himself working full-time in the sales department of Air France. Then, when those inner connections to the activity he really loved—baking—grew too strong to ignore, a ready-bell within him went off and Yosses decided to enroll at City Tech.

He came to love the place; like him, many other students were career changers. "There were people out of high school, and there were people older than I, people who were lawyers and accountants," he said, still in awe at the diversity of the student body, in ethnicity and economic background.

He still remembers his instructors. "These people inspire you for life," he remarked in a telephone interview. After graduation, Yosses got what he wanted, a chance to practice his newly acquired skills in interesting places.

"I was lucky enough to get a placement in Europe, thanks to Professor Thomas Ahrens, who was a great friend and mentor to many of us," recalled Yosses, who makes his home in Manhattan when he's not at the White House. His career path took him to several noted restaurants, including Josephs by Citarella, Bouley and Tavern on the Green.

And then earlier this year, he reached a career pinnacle, as he was appointed pastry chef at the White House. Yosses

says the presidential palate runs toward healthy fruit and fruit-based desserts, although “the Bushes both love chocolate. Mrs. Bush loves food and loves talking about menus. She has lots of ideas and is always looking for things that are original, healthy and tasty.”

What Yosses especially enjoys about his work is the act of creating. “I enjoy making pastries because it is precise and it has an architectural aspect,” he said.

Estevez, who is from the Dominican Republic, got his first culinary crash courses in his early teens as he helped his mother make family meals. “She was a schoolteacher, and she came home every day during the siesta period, from 12-2 p.m., to put the finishing touches on the beans and rice, and I would chop things and add garlic and spices to the dishes,” he recalled fondly.

He eventually immigrated to the United States, settling in Washington Heights. Along the way he began working at jobs that very much suited his tastes. Estevez was promoted from cook to banquet chef at the Four Seasons in only eight years, and was the executive chef for Manhattan’s Chez Louis before he went to Gracie Mansion.

But school always seemed forbidding to him. “I never was a good student,” said the 42-year-old Estevez. Eventually, he concluded that if he wanted to continue climbing the culinary ladder, a degree would give him a helpful boost.

And so he enrolled at City Tech, where his long-held fears were put to rest, and his dreams were encouraged. The courses there, Estevez says, are a combination of practical training and liberal arts instruction, a blend that he finds pleasing. “I’m taking math, English and accounting along with the food and wine classes,” he said.

The City Tech classes have helped him deal more efficiently with his current duties, which include planning, purchasing and preparing, Estevez says. At Gracie Mansion, where the mayor often hosts ethnic-themed events, Estevez and his staff of four cooks are called upon to create a variety of melting-pot dishes that celebrate the diversity of the Big Apple’s culinary culture.

“It’s a unique opportunity to work with so many different cuisines,” he said, adding that “we reach out to community chefs, and they help us. I’ve done Irish breakfasts, Italian foods, and during the summertime, we have barbecues. Every week is different.”

Yosses and Estevez are looking forward to many more dinners in their respective, famous kitchens. “I’ve reached my goal, and I’m happy to stay as long as they want me.” Yosses said.

Both Yosses and Estevez are involved with Spoons Across America, a not-for-profit organization founded by City Tech hospitality management alumna and professor Julia Jordan, which provides opportunities for children to learn about food and nutrition through hands-on cooking and baking. Yosses serves on the board of directors; Estevez, on the board of advisors.

Estevez can’t wait to get his degree, which he hopes to earn in a year. “I wish I could take a full load of classes in each semester, but it’s not possible. I’m too busy in the kitchen,” he said. “One day, I would love to teach cooking, and for that you need credibility. That’s why I want to finish the degree. I want to be prepared for the future.”

City Tech is located at 300 Jay Street in Downtown Brooklyn at the MetroTech Center academic and commercial complex.