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From left to right: Malachi and June are students in the Sacramento County Youth Detention Center's culinary arts education program. Students are taught by chef Carissa Jones standing next to Sacramento County Chief Probation Officer Lee Seale.

OFF MENU

# Culinary dreams

BY STEPH RODRIGUEZ / [stephr@newsreview.com](mailto:stephr@newsreview.com)

Light chatter fills the dining room at El Centro Junior/Senior High School in Rancho Cordova, where students enrolled in a new culinary arts education program were ready to give guests a taste of what they've learned. Tiers of thick heirloom tomato sliders, rows of creamy deviled eggs and small plates of mixed green and Caesar salads were just some of the hors d'oeuvres served on campus last week.

"Hello ma'am, how are you doing today?" asked a young man in a crisp, white dress shirt and maroon tie as he took my drink order. He then handed over a refreshing watermelon limeade. Bright pink in color with a hint of coconut and garnished with a thin slice of melon.

Yet students enrolled in this culinary program have something else in common besides an interest in cooking. They're also serving out their sentences inside the Sacramento County Youth Detention Facility. With a \$500,000 grant from the California Community College Chancellor's Office, the Sacramento County Office of Education and the Sacramento County Probation Department launched the program to help El Centro students inside the facility gain the necessary culinary skills, and a

California Food Handlers Card, that will prepare them for future careers in the industry.

The chef teaching this group of teenagers knife skills, egg cookery and emulsions is Carissa Jones. Jones brings a wealth of experience having worked on Norwegian cruise lines, helped open restaurants in and around Sacramento and also taught at Le Cordon Bleu.

"She doesn't necessarily encourage us to make mistakes, but she welcomes them," said Malachi, a sandy-blond haired, 18-year-old with beaming green eyes. "On top of that, she's very motivational. Her biggest thing is that she's going to encourage you to taste everything you make, and she wouldn't have you do anything that she wouldn't do herself."

Malachi made a variety of deviled eggs for the afternoon tasting, which included bacon and chive; avocado, cilantro and red onion; and sun-dried tomato and thyme. For Jones, seeing lessons such as balancing salt, acid and fat click among her students is an instant reward.

"My student that made the dressing for the mixed green salad today was tasting it and he immediately said, 'Oh, this is too acidic,'" she said. "He

was able to adjust it and taste it until he was happy with the balance."

June, 18, another student, had a hand in all of the desserts, making lemon curd and strawberry coulis for the mini meringue pies, plus baking dozens of cookies and other sweet treats.

"We get to taste everything that we make and if we feel like it needs something more you can add a pinch of this or a pinch of that to bring out a more savory flavor," June said.

Back at home is where June said she developed a love for cooking by watching her mother in the kitchen.

Introducing her students to new dishes and flavors is one positive activity that Jones said breaks up the day-to-day life inside the detention center. Her goal is to prepare them for a better life on the outside.

"The kids are amazing. They just want adults [who] are consistent and follow through and will spend the time to give a little bit of themselves," Jones said. "I've got high school kids that are graduating and getting ready to go out into the world and they need a first job. If you are willing to be patient with them and help guide them along the way, they will be amazing, loyal employees."

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