Community Kitchen Celebrates 20 Years

Transforming lives through culinary education

For 20 years, the Community Kitchen culinary job training program at the Rhode Island Community Food Bank has prepared low-income adults for careers in the food industry. More than 600 students have graduated from the program and moved on to a wide range of opportunities in every field.

Community Kitchen was started to offer adults a hand up, rather than a hand out. It was a way to lift them out of poverty, while also developing a skilled workforce for the food industry.

As Andrew Schiff, CEO of the RI Community Food Bank explains: “For a moment, put yourself in their shoes. Imagine you are unemployed with few job prospects. There’s little money left to pay the bills. You need to start over, to begin again. You put your trust in the Food Bank and the Community Kitchen program. That’s not an easy step to take, but it can change your life.”

About Community Kitchen

Community Kitchen is a full-time 14-week program that prepares participants for entry-level jobs in the restaurant and food service industry. Students are trained in basic cooking skills as well as various aspects of food service operations, kitchen safety and first aid. Beginning in the 6th week of the program, participants are assigned an on-the-job training site where they spend time every Monday gaining practical experience in a local business.

Students also learn professional and life skills like interviewing, resume writing and conflict resolution. While practicing their skills in the Food Bank’s industrial kitchen, students are preparing meals that are served to children at afterschool programs in low-income communities.

Community Cooking is about much more than cooking skills. As graduate Johan Jansen explains, “They showed the confidence in me that I didn’t have in myself at that point and that has made such a difference in my life.”

Celebrating Community Kitchen

The RI Community Food Bank hosted a special alumni event to celebrate twenty years of Community Kitchen. Alumni, staff, volunteers and friends of the Food Bank came together at Skyline at Waterplace in Providence to recognize this outstanding achievement.

Chef Heather Langlois was honored for two decades of dedication and commitment to the program.

As she explains, “It’s just been so inspirational to witness what takes place in 14 weeks.”

Since Community Kitchen started in 1998:

• More than 600 students have graduated
• A total of sixty-six 14-week classes have been held
• 80% of graduated students are employed
• Many generous donors have supported the program.

Graduates have accomplished many amazing feats from working in award-winning restaurants to starting their own businesses. And they continue to support each other through a network of caring, nurturing alumni.
Savor Event Raises $195,000 For Culinary Job Training

Jacques Pépin Foundation Collaboration

During the past year, the Jacques Pépin Foundation and the Community Kitchen program at the Rhode Island Community Food Bank have come together over a shared mission to educate and prepare the next generation of chefs for careers in the culinary field. Training programs also help lift participants out of poverty so they can support themselves and their families over the long-term.

Rollie Wesen, co-founder & chief operations officer of the Jacques Pépin Foundation, explains how this collaboration formed after he visited Community Kitchen and saw our students and their teachers in action:

“I was so moved by the incredible work that Chef Heather and Chef Ron were doing. It was so exciting to see these students that were really at the edge of hope find their confidence and a pathway back into the workforce.”

Savor: An Evening with Jacques Pépin

To launch this collaboration, the Food Bank hosted an event with Jacques Pépin at Newport Vineyards in Middletown. A spectacular evening with Jacques Pépin and special guest Sara Moulton, the fundraiser featured world-class wine pairings and a multi-course feast with plates prepared by:

- Matthew McCartney from Jamestown FISH
- Rick Moonen from RM Seafood at Mandalay Bay
- Jeremy Sewall from Island Creek Oysters
- Champe Speidel from Persimmon
- Andy Teixeira from Newport Vineyards (Host Chef)
- Ming Tsai from Blue Dragon
- James Wayman from Mystic Oyster Club
- Baking and Pastry Arts Faculty of Johnson & Wales University: Jaime Schick, Thao Rich and Maura Metheny

Other celebrity chefs in attendance included Rick Bayless, Michel Nisan, Claudine Pépin and Rollie Wesen. Live music was performed by the Pat McGee Band.

Guests were treated to a live auction with prizes including dinner with Jacques Pépin, a “Best Cuisine at Sea” cruise and a day on the set of “Simply Ming” with Ming Tsai.

Community Kitchen graduate Khadijah Muhammad-Kebe spoke about the impact of the program on her life. Before she enrolled she had been divorced, laid off from her banking job and she was losing her home to foreclosure. Then she was accepted into Community Kitchen.

“This became my first step in a direction that would eventually change my life. I learned not only how to work in the kitchen but life skills that helped me love and value myself in ways that I never could have imagined.”

Since graduation, Khadijah has earned her Culinary Arts degree and is preparing for her Masters. She works as a culinary education teacher in a public school system in Texas. She has come full circle.

The event raised $195,000 to support Community Kitchen and other culinary job training programs that transform the lives of students like Khadijah. The successful evening was made possible thanks to the generous sponsorship of

- Oceania Cruises
- Atria Senior Living
- Butchertown Grocery
- Bank of America/U.S. Trust
- Collette