



Employers crave applicants with broad palates.

Thanks to the opportunity for Work-Based Learning at the Lowndes County School District's Career Technology Center, Jonathon Jennings, Gibson Cooke, David Akwaowo and John Beatty have resumes bursting with flavor.

In fact, the experience the students gained in three years in the CTC's Culinary Arts program has set them up to do just about anything, including prepare first-class meals.

"They've developed essential life and career skills, such as time management, teamwork, adaptability and communication under pressure," said Chef Victoria Richardson, the Culinary Arts instructor at the CTC. "Having jobs in food service builds on those lessons in

powerful ways. The industry teaches resilience. Things move fast, and problems have to be solved in real-time. It also fosters accountability; whether plating dishes or serving guests, students quickly learn their actions directly impact the customer experience.”

Work-based learning is an educational approach that provides students with learning experiences in a work-place setting. Culinary arts and welding students at the CTC took advantage of opportunities to gain that experience this school year, while Year 3 Health Science students had an opportunity to go through Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certification at Aurora Health & Rehabilitation in Columbus.

Richardson said Year 3 culinary arts students receive significant hands-on experience in back-of- and front-of-house roles in their jobs. She said that work provides an opportunity to learn more than just how to cook, and that those skills are transferable to any career. She also said food service work gives students a chance to develop emotional intelligence.

“Learning to work with a wide variety of people and respond to customer needs with professionalism builds empathy and maturity,” Richardson said. “It’s an industry that rewards hustle and growth, and I’m confident these students will carry that work ethic and adaptability into whatever comes next for them.”

Jennings, who received the Director’s Award at the CTC’s Awards Day, works for Bridgett Harding at Harding Catering. He started before Thanksgiving break and worked 12-hour shifts -- usually 30-40 hours a week.

“I don’t think I would have been able to handle as much as I could have handled right off the bat if I didn’t have kitchen experience,” Jennings said. “I got hit with real-life expectations my first day working there. On

top of that, it can get super busy. You can go from doing nothing to having to pack everything up and set it up and then you're running around like a chicken with its head cut off. It's something."

Jennings will continue on the culinary arts path at Mississippi University for Women. He said working in catering exposed him to food preparation, delivery, presentation and serving. He said he enjoyed the experience because his boss and co-workers encouraged him to learn as many new skills as possible.

Cooke has worked for nearly a year at Little Dooey's on Highway 45 in Columbus. She, too, has worked in a variety of roles in the front and the back of the restaurant. She said each position has prepared her for her next step, even though she is considering pursuing a career in painting.

"It has taught me a lot more about time management and how quickly I need to do things," Cooke said. "I was good at managing my time before I started taking classes at the CTC, but it taught me a lot more about it."

Cooke said the skills she has learned in three years at the CTC have enhanced her ability to cook. In addition to her technical skills, she said she learned important interpersonal skills, including that everyone comes from a different background and that you shouldn't judge anyone because of that.

Akwaowo entered the program with a background in cooking because his father is in the restaurant business. He said he wasn't sure if he would enjoy the program, but that he liked it early in his first year and opted to complete the course. Along the way, Akwaowo has worked at The Grill (in Columbus) and Chick-fil-A (also in Columbus), where he has been working for the past three months.

“Working in the kitchen with my dad, I used to try to get everything out as quick as possible,” said Akwaowo, who is going to study law at the University of Mississippi. He said he may look for work in catering in the Oxford area while he is in school. “I learned you can’t control what your co-workers do. Sometimes the front of the house wants the food now and if I am in the back of the house and I have food in the fryer, it is going to take three minutes. Someone from the front of the house will come back 30 seconds later and ask, ‘Do you have nuggets?’ I will tell them, ‘No’. You have to learn patience because the time is going to come anyway, so there is no need to stress about it.”

Working in fast food can put patience and food safety to the test, but Akwaowo said he relied on the ServSafe training all CTC Culinary Arts students go through to keep him grounded, especially on busy days. He said delivering food in a timely manner is crucial, but it is even more important to follow the proper techniques and procedures before you serve that food.

Beatty has worked catering events and at Mulligan’s Restaurant and Grille at Lion Hills Center and Golf Course in Columbus. He said the CTC’s culinary arts program has been better than he expected because it has been a fun environment and that he enjoys working with Richardson.

Beatty worked at The Grill prior to Lion Hills. He said his current position – where he works as a dishwasher and as a line cook -- has taught him how to manage his time and adjust when things get busy. He plans to go into business administration and take online classes at East Mississippi Community College while he continues to work. Beatty envisions a career in finance or real estate, or he may return to the food business, possibly catering.

Regardless of which route he takes, Beatty encourages students in the district to try any program at the CTC.

“If you think you’re going to like it, come try it,” Beatty said. “After two weeks, you’re going to be in your work area. Whether it is culinary, nursing, cosmetology, welding, engineering, you have an opportunity to see if you will really like it. I never thought I would like culinary this much, but here I am doing year three.”

Akwaowo and Jennings agree, and they said that even one year in culinary arts at the CTC can help students develop a palate that expands beyond the frozen food aisle.

“The biggest thing I see in a lot of people, especially Year 1 students, is they are so scared they’re going to mess it up that they don’t even attempt it,” Akwaowo said. “They’re so worried they’re going to be the worst person in the kitchen. I can assure you Chef Richardson doesn’t care. When you don’t know, you don’t know. I can never fault you for something you didn’t have any knowledge of. Until I teach you how to cut vegetables properly, how are you ever going to know?”

“Even if you only take the class for one year or you go through for the whole thing like I did, you will have the basic skills to learn how to cook. As chef said, ‘You’re not going to be making frozen pizza and frozen noodles all the time’. In college and when you grow up, you won’t have to make something impressive, but you will be able to put food on your table that is edible, and it likely will be healthier than frozen pizza and frozen noodles. I would advise people to take the class, even if you don’t pursue a career in culinary.”

Said Jennings, “The biggest thing is to have fun. Pick something you think is fun and do it. Don’t feel ashamed if you are a guy and you want to try cosmetology. You shouldn’t feel embarrassed because of your

interests. I think you should push through and have fun with what you're doing and not feel humiliated by it. Be proud that is what you enjoy. I enjoyed culinary, and I got called 'a teacher's pet' for the longest time in my first year because I was always asking chef questions. I was always trying to challenge myself because I was so interested in it. I don't feel ashamed of that now."

The success of students like Jennings, Cooke, Akwaowo and Beatty shows career and technical education at the Lowndes County Career Technology Center is more than just a class – it's a launchpad. Through work-based learning, students develop real-world skills, confidence and a clearer understanding of their futures. Whether they stay in the kitchen or take their talents elsewhere, they leave with more than just recipes in their back pocket -- they carry with them the grit, adaptability and professionalism that will serve them in any career.