

Culinary program sweetens the deal for H-F students

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It's not a terrible day at school when you get to bake and eat shortbread cookies.

Even though it sounds fun – and it is – students in Homewood-Flossmoor High School's culinary classes take their work seriously. They measure carefully, check their recipes repeatedly, and in one recent class, discussed with fervor whether their cookies contained enough salt.

H-F High School offers three levels of culinary classes (Culinary 1 and 2 and Advanced Culinary) within its Career and Technical Education Department. Students can opt to take the classes in succession at any time during their time at H-F.

"The culinary program has really expanded," said teacher Janet Marks. "There's been more interest in learning how to cook, and cook properly. Kids love to eat, so they're interested in how to make things they like."

Culinary students learn about food, cooking techniques and sanitation in a classroom setting, and spend time doing practical work in a large kitchen space. It includes several ovens, loads of counter space and cabinets, along with a demonstration table – the kind with a mirror above so the class can watch the instructors demonstrating preparation techniques.

Marks has been teaching culinary classes for 27 years, with 17 of them at H-F. Classes these days consist of half girls and half boys, a shift that began in the 1980s as more women entered the workforce.

"A lot of them have parents where the father cooks, and there's more of a dual role in cooking at home," Marks said.

During a recent in-class sweet potato challenge, 17-year-old Jaden Stokes impressed the culinary teacher. Marks said she was happy none of the students used the microwave to cook the tuber, but she was especially impressed by Jaden's idea to shred it to make potato pancakes.

A longtime home cook, Jaden said his favorite dish made in class was a chorizo and egg breakfast. The Homewood resident said he enjoys the feedback he gets from teachers and peers. He also appreciates learning new techniques.



An overhead mirror helps students watch what's happening at a demonstration table as the class prepares ingredients to make cookies in Culinary 1 class at H-F High School. Teacher Alyssa Marassa, in the yellow sweater, helps out.

"I really like cooking. I mostly like the eating part, but it's fun to get feedback. Feedback helps me improve," Jaden said. "The classes have really helped my cutting skills. Keeping my thumb and index finger at the end of the knife for balance."

Not all students have Jaden's level of experience when they start culinary classes, said teacher Alyssa Marassa. She helps them all learn how to pick up any recipe and be able to complete it.

"Some of them have never cooked at all when they walk in here. They ha-

ven't even used a microwave. Others have some experience," Marassa said. "So part of the class is working to get everyone to the same level."

Marassa said she loves teaching students about the central sauces of cooking, starting with the roux for macaroni and cheese. She said her favorite unit is all about the versatile egg.

While they learn about ingredients and cooking techniques, students also earn designation as certified food managers, Marks said. In addition to safe food handling, they study sanitation and take an exam to become certified.



Carole Sharwarko/H-F Chronicle

Culinary 1 students at H-F High School work in groups to bake cookies, which will be tasted by the entire class.

At the end of the courses, each class level participates in a practical final that requires them to cook. Culinary 1 students participate in an "Iron Chef" style competition, while Culinary 2 students compete in "Cupcake Wars." Students in Advanced Culinary create a food truck concept for their final project.

"The students create a menu, make a few of the menu items, decorate a small paper food truck, (come up with) a logo and name of the food truck," Marks said. "It is a fun end of the year project."

Along with the other four culinary teachers, Marks said she continues to watch the school's program evolve. They expect an expansion soon, with even more options for students.

Senior Ariana Keys went through each level of culinary classes, and now takes the elective as a Special Projects class. Now she gets to decide what to make, and she was proud of working on a swan pastry puff, what she called a "good, sweet dessert."

In Advanced Culinary class, she worked on fondant cakes and found a love for the sugar-coated creations. She started a business of baking cakes for clients under the name Kreatives by Airy.

"I have to credit this program with giving me a passion for cooking and showing me what I was capable of," Ariana said.