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Culinary Students Spice Up Lunches for Seniors

Used to be, the seniors at the Mead Valley Community Center near Perris contented themselves with frozen food and pre-packaged meals for their daily lunch.

The choices were limiting, the taste lacking and the response from the 60-plus crowd underwhelming.

No more.

Today, the Perris Valley residents who dine daily are treated to freshly made meals of tilapia, stir-fried beef, pork stroganoff, beef burgundy, chicken chili, barbecue chicken, corn bread, cream of broccoli soup and other tasty dishes. It's all part of a culinary-training program operated by the non-profit Smooth Transition Inc., which provides an assortment of educational and vocational training for at-risk adults.

The six-month course takes student from the basics of keeping a clean kitchen to learning various styles of regional cooking, including Asian, French and Mediterranean cuisine as well as mastering baking and pastries.



Smooth Transition chef-instructor Martin Corso and student Nina Duenas, of Perris, prepare cucumbers as part of meal served to senior citizens through the Smooth Transition program operated out of the Mead Valley Community Center.

Martin Corso, the teaching chef who runs the culinary program, said it's designed to get students into the workforce upon graduation. The goal of the program is to graduate students who can work in chain restaurants and mom-and-pop eateries and cater weddings, graduations and functions at area businesses.

"We throw them into the fire," Corso said with a smile.

Smooth Transition works with Riverside County Workforce Investment Board to reducing "the teen drop-out rate, pregnancy, homelessness and crime rates" and believes the partnership will create "infinite opportunity and long-lasting prosperity for our workforce."

The non-profit also offers English as a second-language and adult basic education courses and classes for people wishing to obtain their high-school equivalency certificate.

Robin Goins, Smooth Transition president and executive director, said the agency's motto is simple: "believe, achieve, receive."

"We provide care-path options for people who do not fit traditional paths," Goins said. "We offer affordable and flexible opportunities."

The culinary academy operates from a commercial kitchen in the Mead Valley Community Center, 21091 Rider Street, west of Perris.

It's a small program, numbering between six and 10 students at a time. Tuition costs about \$7,000, a fraction of what higher-profile cooking academies charge. Corso said tuition assistance through grants is available. About 80 percent of graduates are placed in restaurants upon completing the Smooth Transition Culinary Academy.

Perris resident Nina Duenas said she's learned enough during her time at the culinary academy to handle line cooking in a restaurant and specialty cuisine at a private party. Classwork includes everything from preparing pancakes and eggs to chicken Parmesan to ceviche to her favorite, chorizo burritos.

Duenas will graduate in early 2016.

"I've learned great cooking skills and life skills," Duenas said. "I'm doing what I love to do."



Smooth Transition board member Sue Marshall chats with Perris Valley resident Gilbert Williams, 86, during a recent lunch meal at the Mead Valley Community Center.

As they learn their trade, the student-chefs prepare fresh made lunches for senior citizens, many who say they consider the mid-day meal a high-point of their day. Perris Valley residents Yolanda and Gilbert Williams say they never miss a chance to share food and chat with friends.

The Williams are members of the Perris Valley Chamber of Commerce and support the City by participating in various activities throughout the year—including parades, Live Well Perris events and military veterans.

"We like to socialize with people of our own age," said Gilbert Williams, 86. "The food is really good. The atmosphere is very enjoyable."

Yolanda Williams, 67, said she likes the notion that all meals are prepared on site, served in proper proportions and include all sorts of flavorful choices. The mid-day meals also provides a place for seniors to commiserate.

"A lot of use don't have any place to socialize," she said. "The food is fresh and we look forward to it every day."

The Williamses often meet with Robert Johnson, 74, who says he spends one to three hours every time he eats lunch at the community center.

"I look forward to intelligent conversation and sharing my opinions," Johnson said. "It keeps me stimulated. Life is short and if you don't try to enjoy it, you're not thinking like you should."

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