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The Teacher Ate My Homework

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

BROOKE ARCE has never eaten at Le Bernardin. She has not even heard of it, even though she could walk there from her high school in Midtown Manhattan.

Like almost 70 percent of her classmates, Brooke, 15, comes from a family poor enough to qualify for free school lunches. There is no way she will be eating at Le Bernardin any time soon. But she may cook there one day.

Brooke, who lives in Harlem, has been cooking since before she was 10. The first dish she ever prepared was bread topped with peppers and melted cheese. "I thought it was the hottest thing on earth," she said.

So she kept cooking, and watching food shows on television. Two years ago, when it was time for high school, she applied to **Food and Finance High School**, the first New York City high school dedicated to the food business. The school is an experiment in the city's efforts to create more small schools and is part of the national movement to elevate culinary training.

At Food and Finance High School, food is woven into every aspect of the academic load. English classes use books like "Fast Food Nation" by Eric Schlosser and "My Year of Meats" by Ruth L. Ozeki. On a recent afternoon students were reading a profile of Dave Thomas, the founder of Wendy's.

They learn math by measuring ingredients for a cake or by writing a business plan for a restaurant. They can earn science credits by raising bok choy hydroponically and tending to tanks of tilapia designed by a scientist from the Cornell University Cooperative Extension.

Coordinating the culinary program with academic classes helps the school meet the higher standards of the federal No Child Left Behind law. Other schools around the country are considering similar curriculums, said Richard Grausman, president of the Careers Through Culinary Arts Program, which helps prepare poor and minority children for food industry jobs and has trained teachers at the school.

Some of the school's lessons seem simple, but their effects can have a deeper impact. For example, Brooke learned that pizza is considered Italian food.

"I thought it was just New York food," she said. "But pizza margherita was named after an Italian queen."

Even extracurricular activities at the school are food-related. There is an after-school program dedicated to food politics and nutrition called Eatwise (Educated and Aware Teens Who Inspire Smart Eating) and a catering club that prepares meals for events at the school.

By graduation, a student will be equipped with a certificate in safe food-handling from the National Restaurant Association and experience from a senior year internship, which might be in the school cafeteria or someplace else in the city, like Amy's Bread. The bakery's owner, Amy Scherber, is one of several people from New York hotel and food businesses on the school's advisory board.

"This is a really cutting-edge culinary high school education," said Jessica Mates, director of high school programs for **FoodChange**, the advocacy group that began in 1980 as a way to help low-income New Yorkers eat better. The group is helping the Department of Education improve food in school cafeterias, runs a food pantry and a community kitchen, prepares taxes for the poor and now helps run the culinary school and its sister school (for hotel careers), the High School of Hospitality Management.

"We're in New York," said Roger E. Turgeon, principal of Food and Finance High School. "What better place in the world can a kid learn to be in the hotel and restaurant business?"

The school's timing is fortunate, too. The National Restaurant Association projects that over the next 10 years the number of restaurant cooking jobs will increase by almost 17 percent, almost two and a half times the projected increase five years ago. And given the number of jobs in catering and hotels, Mr. Grausman said, "the whole sector of food service is a hidden giant."

The **culinary school and the school of hospitality management**, which opened in 2004 and together have about 600 students, are set inside the sprawling building at 525 West 50th Street that used to be **Park West High School**. Built in 1979, Park West was designed in part as a culinary vocational school. It had 18 kitchens and a butchery room approved by the United States Department of Agriculture. Teachers from all over the city would stop in after school to buy meat butchered by the students.

Things changed. The culinary program turned into a parking lot for students who were out of academic options. Like other large high schools in the city, security became a problem. A baking room became a detention facility. Metal detectors were brought in.

Remaking that kind of high school into a new one had its challenges. The school system, designed to educate 1.1 million children at more than 1,400 schools, was not set up for the quirks of a culinary school. There was no approved school vendor, for example, that sold chef's whites or kitchen scales.

Rehabilitation has been slow. A lot of the kitchens still have the dated look of an old hotel kitchen, with steam jacketed kettles, dusty gray Hobart blenders and banged-up metal scales. But there is a new kitchen, opened in March after \$700,000 worth of work arranged by the office of the City Council speaker, Christine C. Quinn. Its four professional workstations rival some of the best kitchens in the city.

From the start, the new culinary high school has had a champion in Alex Askew, founder of the Black Culinarian Alliance.

"I envision this to be the West Point of culinary high school," he said. "This is going to be the organic solution to the worker shortage facing restaurants and the need these kids have to find a career they can take on the road with them."

Back in the day, when cooking was cooking, a vocational student might be able to get by with basic skills, he said. But today the culinary world is about more than knowing how to peel and slice bags of potatoes and roast big cuts of meat. So in addition to basic culinary skills the school is teaching food styling, restaurant design and budgeting for a small business.

One of those small businesses will be a bakery and smoothie shop at street level. It is expected to be open to the public perhaps by next year. And with luck and some outside financing, a large, glassed-in demonstration kitchen will become a television studio. These days, what's a culinary career without a chance to be on TV?

"The trick is to amass as many tools in your toolbox as you can and then you become the master mechanic," Mr. Askew said.

Not every student who attends Food and Finance High School goes for the cooking. But they quickly catch the fever. Rebecca Rios, 15, from Elmhurst, Queens, landed there by default. Now she is a star student, approaching baking with the seriousness of a pastry chef at Per Se, although she has never heard of Per Se.

She hopes to one day open a pastry shop at a marine park, so she can combine her new love with her longstanding interest in marine biology. She chose baking over savory cooking because “everything is exact.” But not restrictive, she discovered.

“First term we made crepes,” she said. “You could make them 100 different ways and use 100 different fillings, but it was still the same basic food.”

Brooke, her classmate, rejected baking for the reason Rebecca loves it. In baking, there’s no going back.

“If you put too much of something in, it’s going to taste nasty,” she said, “and there’s nothing you can do about it.”