

Cookin' on Campus

Every week Penn State students run Café Laura as part of what some feel is the most difficult course they will take.

By Dan Schwartzman
COLLEGIAN STAFF WRITER
dis130@psu.edu

Although the long half-moon-shaped room appears the same, every night a different menu conceived by the students of Hotel, Restaurant and Institutional Management 430 (Advanced Food Production and Service Management) creates an entirely new restaurant at Café Laura, 101 Mateer Building.

At 5:30 p.m., classical music plays from the sound system. About 25 tables, draped with white cloth coverings, dot the empty room.

The large windows outlining its outer arc evoke a patio-like feel.

The place settings frame a cream-colored menu, bound by a delicate red string and adorned with a picture of Susanna Foo — a Philadelphia-based restaurateur who inspires tonight's theme, a fusion of Chinese and French style cooking.

Aside from "Asia's Finest," this semester's themes include "Alaskan Cruise," "Best of the Hawaiian Islands" and many others inspired by trends in the restaurant industry.

Students in each of the three sections test recipes and plan meals, which will be served to students and locals during the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evening classes for the rest of the semester.

Tonight's standouts are an appetizer, Pork Dumpling Platter accompanied with a Soy-Ginger Sauce, and dessert, Coconut Mousse garnished with pan-fried Bananas — both \$4.

Every student in the major is required to take HRIM 430 and a prerequisite course, HRIM 329 (Introduction to Food Production and Service), to become a certified ServSafe food handler. Other than a few paid staffers, the restaurant's employees are students.

Instructor Matt Brenner said the class is practical, allowing students working in teams of six or seven to experience all aspects of a restaurant.

This means that one night, a student might be working on the management team, and the next,

"This is a class everyone loves to hate and hates to love."

Peter Yersin
Instructor, HRIM 430

the student could be cooking the meals or even cleaning dishes.

Some students have never waited tables before, but after a crash course they serve. Sometimes this inexperience leads to crashing dishes.

Teaching assistant Ashley Bundy (senior-hotel, restaurant and institutional management) said customers tend to be forgiving with student servers.

"They say, 'Oh, it's OK you spilled my red wine on me,'" Bundy said jokingly.

While some servers have mastered waiting tables, some do not fare as well. While entering the kitchen, an off-balance waitress lost some dishes, creating a loud crash.

She sulked into the clean, wide-open kitchen, sliding her feet along the tan-colored tile floor.

One of the line cooks consoled her.

"Be good to my crew," said one manager to a laughing line cook.

A waiter asked for help from his classmates: "Hey, you got two hands?"

Meanwhile the pressure (and temperature) of presiding over the grill intensified.

"I need a steak, medium-rare," said one cook. "Flounder for table 17. How many flounder are left? Give me an exact count."

"Eight," said another cook.

This element of teamwork is one of the aspects that get students through potentially one of the longest classes at Penn State. Beginning at 1:25 p.m., the three-credit class often takes longer than 10 hours to complete, not including all the meetings the students attend to plan meals.

"It's hard in the sense that it's long," Bundy said.

By the end of the semester, students accumulate more than 600 pages of recipes, meal plans and reports.

"This is a class everyone loves to hate and hates to love," Instructor Peter Yersin said.

Brenner added that many students take the course with the realistic expectation that they are in for a lot of work.

"Hopefully they leave here with a sense of accomplishment," he said.

One crucial element to being

successful in planning the meals involves purchasing the food, which students do through Housing and Food Services. Aside from the help of their instructors, Café Laura General Manager Scott King helps with financial decisions on what — and how much — to buy.

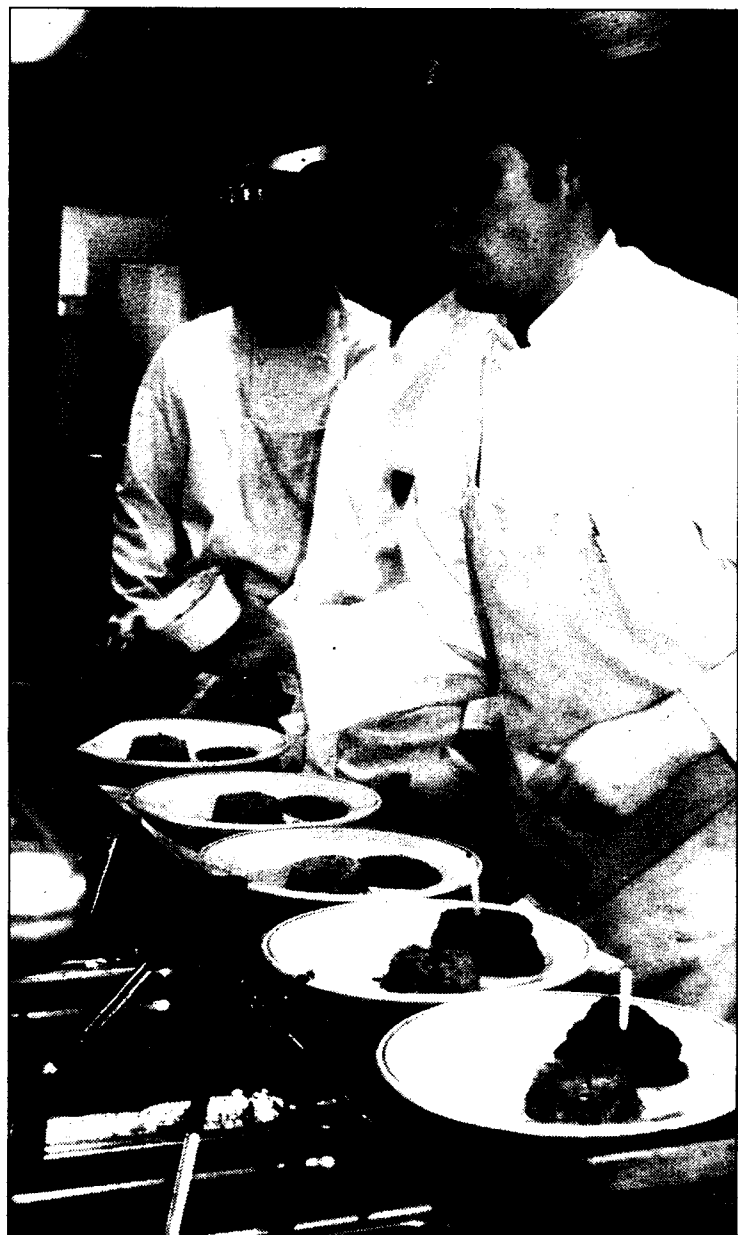
The prices and the products are constrained by costs and quantities (often smaller than other restaurants).

The appetizers range from \$3 to \$5, entrées from \$12 to \$18 and desserts from \$3 to \$6. All tips go toward a scholarship fund.

All tips received go toward the scholarship fund, regardless of whether they are received as Lion Cash, credit card or cash.

But before the bill is paid at the end of the meal, customers fill out an evaluation. Students use the feedback to change one of the entrees on their menu for the next meal.

Soon the words: "Last table!" were exclaimed by an excited waiter, and a cheer went up through the kitchen. The only work that remained (besides clean up) was the effort of hoisting celebratory drinks later on at a downtown bar.



Laura Sarowitz/Collegian

Students work a variety of jobs including cooking and wait staff.



Laura Sarowitz/Collegian

Mike Binder (senior-media studies) enjoys a student-planned meal at Café Laura in 101 Mateer Building.