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Thursday December 6, 2018

Taste Test

By Eric F. Spina

If a taste test counts, the nine students in Professor Pat Dolan's Introduction to Food Science Lab just aced their final exam.

The aroma of a gourmet meal filled the ProduceOne Food and Nutrition Laboratory as students in blue aprons scurried about putting the finishing touches on a flavorful, healthy lunch.

Karen and I scored an invitation from program director Jennifer Dalton to join dietetics majors and a few guests at the semester's final exam. That is, final exam meal. Actually, let's call it what it was: a final exam feast!

It's not every day I eat garlic-lemon chicken, tempeh meatballs with pasta and marinara sauce, berry patch salad, lentil soup, zucchini mushroom risotto and TWO desserts — pumpkin cake and apple crisp — for lunch.

The students carefully selected all the dishes on the final exam's menu to help them better understand how their nutrition prescriptions will influence the foods their clients enjoy. All were gluten-free, with the exception of the pumpkin cake, and most of the ingredients were locally sourced from providers like Mission of Mary Cooperative, Hopeful Solutions Urban Farms, and other regional farms.

The experience gave me a flavor (*sorry*) of our dietetics program, which prepares students to sit for a credentialing examination to become registered dietitian nutritionists in private practice, hospitals, nursing homes, clinics and other wellness settings. For the past three years every one of our graduating seniors — a remarkable 100 percent — have been placed in accredited internships, a requirement before they can take the licensing exam. This far exceeds the national average.

As the demand goes up for dietetics professionals, the educational requirements do, too. In 2019, we will launch a master's degree in dietetics and nutrition — a credential required by 2024 — and expand our partnership with Premier Health to provide internships to each student in the graduate program.

Calmly stirring a pot of gluten-free pasta before the buffet lunch, Gina Valentino, a junior from Lexington, Kentucky, didn't appear worried about her performance in the kitchen. "We've cooked all these dishes before in the lab, so today is surprisingly low pressure."

Draping aprons over the backs of their chairs, the students ate the fruits of their labor, sharing cooking tips and stories about why the dietetics field interests them. To a person, they're interested in helping people live healthier lives.

That's why you'll find Tori Sedlmayer, a junior from Temecula, California, doing cooking demonstrations at the RTA bus hub downtown, where fresh produce is sold at The Market. This week, she whipped up a healthy dish of Lo Mein with bell peppers, carrots, mushrooms, and green peppers and gave samples and recipes away.

"The Lo Mein went quick. I've learned to cook dishes there that have a wonderful smell," she said with a laugh. "It's great experience to teach others (about food)."

As part of this course, all students are required to conduct a cooking demo at the RTA market, but Tori wants to continue to create dishes — and share her knowledge of healthy food — as a volunteer there next semester.

I'll take another serving of these students' desires to use their degrees to help people develop healthy lifestyles. Maybe with a little more of that marinara sauce.