

A Bastion of Hospitality

By DAN SCHLOSSBERG



A visit to the Culinary Institute of America will whet your appetite for holiday cheer

Nothing makes a holiday more festive than a memorable meal. It's even more enjoyable when that meal is prepared and served by Culinary Institute of America (CIA) students under the watchful eyes of experienced instructors.

A true winter wonderland that looks like a *Saturday Evening Post* painting by Norman Rockwell, the CIA is not just a single restaurant but a complex of buildings set on a scenic tract of land high above the Hudson River in Hyde Park. Narrated tours led by energetic student guides take guests past test kitchens where other students are learning to bake, fry, and prepare almost any edible creation — including some new ones.

After perusing a gift shop stocked with every imaginable kitchen gadget — not to mention books, smocks, knives, and chef hats — visitors can see students at work in the various restaurants as chefs, cooks, waiters, and hosts. The experience leaves the distinct impression that the Culinary Institute is a bastion of hospitality unlike any other place on the planet.

For the students, no job is too big or too small and no detail is overlooked. If a patron orders a pasta dish with no pepper, butter, or cheese, that request is granted — no matter how much consternation it might pose in the mind of the receiving chef. Before earning that coveted CIA diploma, each of the nearly 3,000 students is not only required to work in the on-campus restaurants but to handle every job from cooking meals to busing tables.

For diners, the experience is definitely different — like spring training before the regular baseball season — and they don't even have to tip! A 17% surcharge applied to each check feeds the CIA's scholarship fund for aspiring but needy students.

Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY
Photo courtesy of CIA



Chefs outside of the main building

Photo courtesy of the Culinary Institute of America

Because reservations become more difficult as the winter holidays approach, advance planning is essential for a trip to the venerable school. On the outside, it has the look and feel of a college campus. But it's the inner layers that separate the Culinary Institute from other institutions of higher learning. Founded in New Haven in 1946, the school moved to its current site, a former Jesuit seminary, to accommodate growing demand. It currently has 41 teaching kitchens and bakeshops; seven demo kitchens; three culinary demonstration theaters; and a culinary library with 86,000 volumes, 4,500 DVDs, and 280 different periodicals. But the most important aspect of the CIA experience, after the students, is the veteran staff: 120 chefs and instructors from 16 different countries.

Passing muster with some of those master chefs is a considerable challenge. The private, non-profit school has many celebrities among its 49,000 alumni. Anthony Bourdain, the food-conscious host of CNN's *Parts Unknown*; Cat Cora; and restaurateur Charlie Palmer are three of the more prominent.

On the Hyde Park campus alone, there are eight — count 'em, eight — places to grab a bite, or maybe something much more. Although the Apple Pie is undergoing

a facelift that will keep it shuttered until the spring, the choices are considerable: American Bounty, Bocuse, and Caterina de Medici feature American, French, and Italian fare, respectively. The school's roster of restaurants also includes the Post Road Brew House, Gatehouse Restaurant, the Restaurant at CIA, and The Bakery Café by Illy. Together, they serve some 330,000 patrons per annum. Many drive north from the Garden State.

Readers of *New Jersey Lifestyle* are fortunate that the biggest and best of the four CIA campuses (also San Antonio, Napa Valley, and Singapore) sits within driving distance. The pastoral 172-acre complex in Hudson in Hyde Park, New York, is better known as the home of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.

The best of the student-staffed restaurants are American Bounty, Bocuse, and Ristorante Caterina de Medici. When they're not working, students often eat in a place called The Egg because of the oval steel sculpture at the front entrance.

Students strive to earn degrees in food business management, culinary sciences, applied food studies, and baking and pastry arts. Almost all land internships after graduation, while many go on to careers as chefs, sous chefs, bakers, cake designers,

dietitians, nutritionists, food and beverage directors, and — drum roll, please — chocolatiers.

More than a healthy handful have opened their own restaurants. Before graduation from the Culinary Institute, every student must design a “pop-up” restaurant — something that doesn't yet exist. They're graded on the theme and the food, so their designs must be as original as possible.

In Hyde Park, culinary skills matter more than gender: the current student body is almost evenly divided, with 52% male and 48% female. The man at the top, CIA president Tim Ryan, is the first Culinary Institute graduate (1977) to become its chief executive.

Founded by two Connecticut women hoping to help returning servicemen in 1946, the CIA assumed its present name in 1951 and New York location in 1972. Its first student-staffed restaurant, the Epicurean Room, opened a year later. Three others opened in the early 1980s.

Although any meal in a CIA restaurant is invariably a blend of innovative recipes and superlative service, there are special events too. Le Reveillon, a traditional French holiday feast usually held on Christmas Eve or New Year's Eve, is held at Bocuse in mid-December, with Cassoulet, a beloved peasant



CIA student chefs
Photo courtesy of CIA



CIA student chefs and staff
Photo courtesy of CIA



Specially prepared dish
Photo courtesy of CIA



CIA main campus
Photo courtesy of CIA

At the CIA main building
Photo by Dan Schlossberg



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dish, scheduled for February. But the coup de grace in 2018 will be the progressive dinner scheduled for June 2. Called the Moveable Feast, it features different courses in each of three CIA restaurants, plus sommelier-selected wines to accompany each offering. Musicians and singers will entertain as diners move from Bocuse to American Bounty and Caterina de Medici. The \$150 price includes food, paired beverages, tax, and service charge.

Coming next October, the third annual Brew U at the CIA will give guests with VIP badges a chance to sample beer and food before the general public and also to meet the brewers and receive a complimentary gift bag. In addition, the CIA offers special programs for food and wine enthusiasts and professional development programs for food industry professionals.

It's hardly surprising that several campus buildings have been built by hospitality giants: the Conrad N. Hilton Library, the Marriott Pavilion, the General Foods Nutrition Center, and the Colavita Center for Italian Food and Wine. Roth Hall, the main building on the Hyde Park campus, is named for co-founder Frances Roth, the Connecticut attorney who wisely created and cultivated a world-class culinary school when none existed.

Unlike the typical American university with a myriad of schools and majors, the CIA's students, faculty, and staff share a deep passion for food, from farm to table and beyond. Their dedication shows.

For further information, contact the Culinary Institute of America, 1946 Campus Drive, Hyde Park, NY 12538, (tel. 845-452-9600). ■

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