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MCC culinary students enjoy new dining space

By: Christine McCluskey , Journal Inquirer

MANCHESTER - Using new audiovisual equipment that projected the image of the plate in front of them onto a big screen, Manchester Community College culinary arts students Fred Huhn and Justin Reich described how they make a brownie look interesting.

During Tuesday's grand opening of the college's new dining rooms, the two students showed visitors how a big plate makes more of an impression than a small one and how to shake powdered sugar and cocoa powder over a dessert.

Afterward, Huhn and Reich said the new dining rooms match the rising standards and reputation of MCC's 250-student culinary arts program.

"It's been a long time coming," Reich said of the renovation project.

The project, which started last June, divided the college's old dining room into three smaller rooms. The rooms were redecorated, and new furniture and equipment was added.

On Tuesday, members of the public visited the new space and enjoyed food prepared by culinary arts students, including turkey sandwiches with cranberry mayonnaise, beef tenderloin sandwiches with horseradish mayonnaise, and, of course, brownies.

The dining room, which is in the college's Lowe Building, hadn't been remodeled since the construction of the building in 1983, Hospitality and Culinary Arts Department Chairwoman Jayne Pearson said.

"It was pretty dark, and it lacked a lot of things that we needed," Pearson said.

The renovations didn't add space to the dining areas, but the designers found ways to better use space that wasn't being used well, she said.

Useless walls were removed, new walls installed, and the one big, dark dining room became three small, well-lit, freshly painted and decorated rooms.

"It makes a difference when you have a really nice facility," Pearson said.

The Cheney Dining Room is named for the family that ran the silk mills that for decades played a central part in Manchester's economy. The Cheney room can connect to the Alice and Alexander Jarvis Dining Room, named after Manchester real estate developers, or the two rooms can be separated by a moveable wall.

Geraldine Lesunaitis of Hamden donated much of her late husband Vincent's wine collection to the college in 2000 for the college's major annual fundraiser, "An Evening of Fine Wines," which she continues to support. The third dining room is named for the couple.

Culinary students use the dining rooms for the meals they regularly serve to the public and for special events, such as recent gourmet meal nights.

"We're trying to set a precedent," so the program will continue to grow, Huhn said.

Huhn and Reich were on the MCC team that in November won first place in the Connecticut Student Chef Competition, beating students from the Connecticut Culinary Institute in Hartford and the Center for Culinary Arts in Cromwell.

The team is now headed to Pittsburgh for the next level of competition.

Huhn said he likes studying at MCC because "you really get out of it what you put into it."

Reich said MCC students get as good or better culinary education than the students at the more expensive Connecticut culinary schools they beat at the competition.

Students at MCC also learn more about restaurant management than they would at other schools, Reich said.

And Huhn said the schedule of a community college is more flexible, allowing them to have jobs. Huhn is a line chef in the Tuscany restaurant at the Mohegan Sun casino, and Reich is a line chef in the recently opened Rocco's restaurant in Manchester.