

A fulfilling graduation for culinary students

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During the past 12 weeks, Geri Haas has learned the fundamentals of cooking and boosted her confidence.

She is a part of the first Culinary Social Enterprise program operated by Bay Area Community Services. Haas, 43, and her classmates graduated Thursday night at the Town House Creative Living Center on Oakland Avenue.

Before her culinary training, Haas said she barely knew how to make lasagne and relied on recipe books to make meals.

"I'm excited and a little sad to be leaving the class," Haas said. "Now my next step is to get a job."

The program is designed to promote culinary training and job referral assistance to disadvantaged low-income people, including the disabled, homeless and the unemployed. It is operated in partnership with the Oakland Pleasant Valley Adult and Vocational Education program and the California Department of Rehabilitation.

An intensive culinary boot camp, students learn about the food service industry, professionalism, food safety, basic knife skills and nutrition education. For 12 weeks, five days a week, students prepared food delivered to seniors or home-bound adults with illnesses or disabilities through the BACS Meals on Wheels program.

Haas and three others are the first Meals on Wheels culinary graduating class.

"It's a great moment for us to have our first class," said Kent Ellsworth, BACS executive director.

"Training in a kitchen setting is priceless and prepares a person for working in the real world."

About 750 older adults in Oakland and Piedmont receive hot, nutritious meals through Meals on Wheels. Ellsworth said creating the culinary program helps to get more fresh produce and locally grown food to seniors.

Students spend several weeks working on food preparation and work alongside professional cooks. They chopped cabbage, sliced carrots and learned about the temperature danger zones when cooking chicken and fish. Students also learned how to prepare flavorful foods in large quantities.

"It's not about opening a can of beans and serving it," Haas said. "It's about getting fresh beans and snapping them."

During the program students toured farmers markets, bakeries and restaurants. They also received cooking demos from food professionals, and were taught by guest lectures from various employers, union representatives and employment agencies.

Haas said her favorite part of the program was learning how to make the "five mother sauces" — bechamel, veloute, espagnole, hollandaise and tomato. She said she is confident her new skills will help her land a job working in a restaurant.

Haas worked as a black jack dealer in Oregon before moving to Castro Valley in April. She learned about the culinary program at an employment agency and decided to sign up. In addition to her new culinary skills, Haas and her classmates were taught basic computer skills, resume writing, interview techniques and job search and job retention skills.

"I didn't even know what a resume or cover letter was ," Haas said. "Now I have what I need to get a job and to give back."

On Monday, the next group of culinary students will begin training and work with staff, volunteers and interns. Applications are accepted year-round for the program.

Ellsworth said the program's main goals are to create "self-sustainability while serving greatest needs of our community."

For more information about BACS Culinary Training Program, visit bayareacs.org/culinary_training.html

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