You ate my homework!

At these culinary-school restaurants, student chefs offer big bargains for big appetites.

By John Tanasychuk
STAFF WRITER

In these days of $50 entrees and $19 glasses of wine, student-run culinary-school restaurants offer the best deals in town.

Their menus are surprisingly sophisticated. The servers aren’t just waiting tables until a better opportunity comes along. At the International Culinary School at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, one student acts as maitre d’. I haven’t received a better restaurant welcome or farewell in years.

While the restaurants’ hours are limited, their menu choices are not.

CHEF’S PALETTE AT THE INTERNATIONAL CULINARY SCHOOL AT THE ART INSTITUTE OF FORT LAUDERDALE
1799 SE 17th St., Fort Lauderdale, 954-760-7957; 12:30-3 p.m. for lunch and 6-8:30 p.m. for dinner Thursday and Friday

First opened 25 years ago on Las Olas Boulevard, this is the granddaddy of South Florida’s student-run restaurants.

John Masi, chef instructor for the restaurant class, explains that working at the 40-seat Chef’s Palette is mandatory for culinary students pursuing a diploma or associate degree. The menu stays the same as a challenge to the students, who might work in restaurants where they’ll be expected to execute the same dish for years. “We want to make sure the last plates look exactly like the first plates they made,” Masi says.

The menu is simple. $14.99 for three-course lunches and $17.99 for three-course dinners. There are choices for each course. While the menu is small, it’s as sophisticated as that found at any bistro in town. For lunch, I started with leg of duck confit served with a crispy white-bean-and-prosciutto cake along with roasted vegetables. My dining partner had creamy squash soup. I moved on to braised short ribs with polenta. But the real winner was crispy red snapper filet with romesco sauce. Truffle-scented pappardelle and pan-roasted chicken breast was also available. Dessert selections this quarter are a chocolate souffle or vanilla panna cotta. Robert Mondavi merlot or Sauvignon Blanc costs $6 per glass or $20 for the bottle.

Don’t come here in a rush. “I think sometimes our service may be a little bit more time-consuming than most folks anticipate,” Masi says. “If folks are in a hurry, we can steer them toward dishes that take less time.”

CAFÉ PROTEGE AT LINCOLN CULINARY INSTITUTE
2410 Metrocentre Blvd., West Palm Beach, 561-887-2433; 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday

While the cafe is open only for 90 minutes three days per week, I don’t know of anywhere else in Palm Beach County where you can order a three-course lunch for $12. That includes tax and tip. The starter choices recently included New England clam chowder, a seafood corn dog or something called Shrimp Protege — three shrimp sautéed with garlic, chilies, lime, bell peppers, asparagus and cream, served with jicama lime slaw. Pasta alla vodka, turkey club, tuna melt and turkey pot pie were among the entrees and the desserts included a 13-layer chocolate cake, a banana split or pumpkin cheesecake. Everything can also be ordered a la carte.

But don’t come here expecting the same menu every day.

“Everything changes, because we have to teach different lessons to the students,” says Dean Pantone, dean of culinary education. “The restaurant is run for the benefit of the students. We’re here for education. We can’t learn how to make prime rib every day of the week.”

On Thursdays, Cafe Protege serves a $12 buffet that may include an antipasto station, a carving station with such items as turkey and pork loin or puff-pastry-wrapped salmon.

The school also runs CP Express from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, serving coffee, breakfast pastries and sandwiches.
made on bread baked in-house. Prices run from $1.50 to $2.50.

THE MCI CAFE AT MIAMI 
CULINARY INSTITUTE
Miami Dade College, 415 NE 
Second Ave., Miami, 
305-237-3276, 7 a.m.- 2 p.m. 
weekdays

Think of this sleek, nine-table 
cafe and bakery as a high-end amenity for students and downtown 
Miami workers. At lunchtime last 
week, one of the tables was taken 
by two young guys playing guitars.

At breakfast, the menu includes 
granola and vanilla honey-scented 
yogurt ($3.50), croque madame 
($5.25) and the frittata of the day 
($4). Lunchtime sandwiches — on 
house-baked bread — include 
ginger-soy-roasted chicken with 
grilled shiitake mushrooms and 
sesame mayo ($6.50), pulled pork 
chipotle barbecue sandwich with 
garlic pickles ($4) and a classic 
cheeseburger ($7).

Students also gain experience 
on the top-floor restaurant called 
Tuyo, which is professionally run 
and helmed by chef Norman Van 
Aken. Many of Tuyo’s farm-to-
table values spill over to the cafe, 
where the salads are made with 
locally grown greens.

Most impressive at the cafe, 
however, are the desserts. Cookies, 
coconut macaroons, banana bread 
and layered chocolates all cost 
about $1, significantly less than cor-
porate coffee shops. Even if you 
don’t eat here, but find yourself on 
campus, be sure to grab one of the 
credible $3 baguettes, also made 
by the students.

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Diner Diane Maranger takes a picture of student Gustavo Tayhardat as he prepares Napoleon beet salads at the Chef’s Palette at the International Culinary School at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale.
Crispy red snapper filet with romesco sauce is a winner at the Chef’s Palette, where you can enjoy a three-course lunch for $14.99.