Published: Monday, Jul. 18, 2011
Updated: Monday, Jul. 18, 2011

Teens cook Italian at Keiser University’s culinary camp

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LAKEWOOD RANCH -- Take a little all-purpose flour.

Put a crater in it.

Add a pinch of salt, a quarter tablespoon of water and a bit of olive oil.

Crack an egg, drop it into the crater and break the yolk with your finger.

Mix it all up with your fingers.

You’re making pasta from scratch.

Mix in about 30 teens from high schools from Tampa to Naples and Sebring, and you have one very busy kitchen.

That was the scene Friday at Keiser University, which was hosting its fourth annual culinary camp.

On four successive Fridays, students learn about cuisine, free of charge. Two weeks ago it was New Orleans Cajun. Last week it was tapas. Friday, Italian was on the menu. Next week for the final session, cheese-making is on tap.

The camps are designed to introduce students to a career in culinary arts.

“Parents talk to their kids about being a doctor or lawyer, but no one says go into food service, which is a growing field,” said Chef Michael Moench, dean of culinary at Keiser.

Crystal Culver, community relations coordinator, goes into schools seeking to attract students to culinary camp. Culinary is now the largest career field offered at the Lakewood Ranch campus.

Among those she helped bring to the camp is Jason Contreras, 14, who will be a sophomore at Southeast High School when classes resume after summer break.

Reasons for attending the camp include learning how to prepare food with the eventual goal of opening a restaurant someday, Contreras said.

Moench said he probably started cooking even younger than Contreras. “My mother was a horrible cook,” Moench said. When he and his brother wanted supper, they got in the habit of making it themselves.

With the benefit of the culinary camp, students come to understand they can buy the ingredients at a grocery and make the dish themselves.

Students eat what they make, too. “We don’t have a lot of leftover food,” Moench said.