Keiser chef prepares future culinary experts

Maria Sonnenberg, For FLORIDA TODAY
4:26 p.m. EST November 26, 2014

The students at Keiser University's Center for Culinary Arts are in great hands with Chef James McGuinness, who for more than four years has served as dean of culinary arts at the Melbourne campus.

McGuinness is more than up to the task of preparing tomorrow's chefs with the education they will need to satisfy the increasingly more complex needs of the dining public.

To be good, a teacher must love the subject he teaches, so McGuinness is very good at what he does, because he adores the culinary field, in part thanks to Graham Kerr, a British fellow some of you foodies might well remember from his cooking show on the telly.

Question: What is your history, Chef?

McGuinness: I was born in Rockaway and raised on the South Shore of Long Island. I moved around after college and finally settled in Chicago, the place I really consider my hometown.
Q: How did you get into the culinary field?

McGuinness: The Galloping Gourmet. It was a cooking show featuring a chef traveling to far-off places and recreating meals he had on his journey.

Our menus at home were very basic … pot roast with noodles, broiled sole, chicken in cream sauce. After seeing this show, I was curious to learn more about dining.

I didn't act on this until years later. I was working for a paper company in sales and I traveled around the Southeast and Midwest. I hated the job, but I loved eating out and soaking up local color. Eventually I enrolled in culinary school, and when I graduated I took a job as an apprentice in a hotel on the Mag Mile in downtown Chicago.

I've been fortunate to do a lot of interesting things in my career. I've worked in the resort business, catering, product development, food styling and, of course, education.

Q: What are your duties at Keiser?

McGuinness: I wear a lot of hats: trainer, facility manager, purchasing director, education coordinator and purchasing manager. I still teach, and that's the part of my job I enjoy most, being in the kitchen with my staff and students.

Q: What is the biggest challenge to students today?

McGuinness: There are lots of opportunities in the industry, but there are a lot more trained individuals going after those positions. Students will have to work harder to get the job they want as a result.

Q: How has the culinary field changed since you got started?

McGuinness: Guests with dietary restrictions and requirements have increased. Students need training to keep current and to satisfy those requests.

Q: Favorite Brevard Restaurant?

McGuinness: Mustard's Last Stand

Q: Signature dish?

McGuinness: Pommes Puree? I don't really have a signature dish. I cook what's available and what I like to eat.

Q: What can't you do without in the kitchen?
McGuinness: Gas. Controlling heat with electric is so fickle. It takes so long to get hot, and then you can't back it down effectively once it starts to glow. Cooking with wood or coal-fired ovens and grills takes time, patience and maintenance. I love the results, but I'd rather be busy with something else. Gas, got to have it.

Q: Three words that describe you?

McGuinness: Intense, Irish and funny.

Q: What's in your bucket list?

McGuinness: Lose the winter weight I've been carrying around for three years.

Q: Famous person I'd like to feed?

McGuinness: Christopher Walken. He's a foodie who grew up in the restaurant business, and I'm sure he knows how to tell a story.

Keiser University Culinary Arts

Where: 900 S. Babcock St., Melbourne

Info: 888-534-7379

What's available: An associate of science degree accredited by the American Culinary Federation

The program provides students with the skills needed to be successful in the food service industry. Students participate in externships that help them ease into a professional role in the culinary arts.

The campus offers has state-of-the-art kitchen and banquet spaces for students.