

IN LACONIA SCHOOLS: HUOT CENTER OFFERS STUDENTS A HEAD START

- By DAVID WARRENDER, Laconia School District
- Mar 6, 2020 Updated Mar 6, 2020



Chef Jack Aldrich demonstrates proper knife techniques to first year students in the Huot culinary arts program. (Courtesy photo)

New Hampshire's Lakes Region is known as a mecca for outdoor recreation, lakeside living and the associated services and accommodations to support a robust travel and tourism economy. Central to this economy is a vibrant culinary landscape with restaurants ranging from family friendly diners and cafes to high end establishments catering to the most adventurous palettes. Behind the scenes are the hard-working men and women who plan, prepare and serve the needs of visitors each year. However, finding experienced and reliable help is not always easy, especially in the fast-paced food service industry.

Chef Jack Aldrich at the Huot Career and Technical Center in Laconia has been helping to support the job pipeline for aspiring chefs, cooks and other food service providers for

the last 20 years. His program has become known not only for delicious food but also for producing graduates who can walk into a restaurant ready to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

“The majority of students come with little to no exposure to cooking and baking at home,” Aldrich explained. “By inspiring them to cook and bake, they have something they can carry on for the rest of their lives.”

Students spend up to two years in the program starting in their junior year, learning kitchen safety, sanitation, menu planning and the various techniques used in the culinary industry. The program has a dining space that is open to the public on a limited basis and hosts functions for area groups. Through their two years, culinary students progress through a series of color-ranked aprons, similar to the belts given in martial arts training. A chef’s coat is earned for students who master the more than 60 standards in the program. For many Huot alumni, this real-world experience has given them a significant leg up in culinary school and beyond.

Brooke Perry, for example, completed the program in 2018 and has already found a niche for herself at the renowned Dominique Ansel Kitchen in New York City. Upon completing her time at the Huot, Perry earned a degree in baking and pastry arts from the New England Culinary Institute in Vermont. Like many culinary students, Perry developed an interest in the culinary field at an early age, working alongside her mother in their family kitchen. She began working part-time in the restaurant business while in high school and speaks fondly of her time working with Chef Aldrich at the Huot.

“I was able to develop my time management skills, and learned how to work as a team. I learned how to prepare various meals and had the freedom to experiment with pastries,” Perry recalled. “Huot has a balance of life skills and technical skills that will set you up for success, if you put in the effort.”

While Perry's culinary aspirations took her to the city, many students leave the Huot program and work or study closer to home. The center has an active agreement with the culinary program at Lakes Region Community College, allowing students to earn college credits while still in high school. Cultivating a local pool of talent is important for area restaurants, inns and other businesses that require skilled culinary professionals.

"We are looking for dedicated, passionate individuals who are invested in what they do," said Lori Contraros, manager of T-Bones and Cactus Jack's in Laconia. The popular local eatery is one of several local businesses represented on the culinary advisory committee at the Huot Center. As part of the advisory committee, Contraros and others help shape the content of the course, provide valuable feedback and even interact directly with students through activities such as mock-interviews and career days. While she feels misconceptions about the culinary field have improved, Contraros says businesses still need to work to stay ahead of the curve in terms of attracting new talent.

"Programs like the Huot are incredible because it can provide real training and experience in the culinary and hospitality field," Contraros said. "If students feel it is the right fit for them but aren't interested or can't afford secondary education, we can absolutely hire them and get them where they want to be."

Chef Aldrich feels his program is an important part of the culinary education landscape in the Lakes Region and points to recent alumni who work at businesses right here in Laconia and some who have even gone on to start their own restaurants. "Some stay local and others decide they want to travel and explore but all and all I am really pleased with the number of graduates who are now working in the industry." Aldrich reports graduates working in a variety of positions in the kitchen, operations and front of the house. "We have students who started at the bottom and are now managers at well-known local establishments and owners of their own business."

For student Ethan Jackson it was a family connection that drew him into culinary. "My dad is in the food service industry, so he was a major influence," explains Jackson who

hopes to eventually be a chef or own his own restaurant. He is weighing his options after graduation which could involve either furthering his studies in the culinary program at Lakes Region Community College or going directly into the workforce. Jackson appreciates the technical skills he is learning in his Huot class, and feels the lessons go beyond the classroom. "I am learning work ethic and what good and bad food looks like. I'm learning that everyone is different but we can all get together and get through it."

Students and families are encouraged to visit the center and learn more about culinary arts and other programs. The Huot Center currently offers 12 programs ranging from building construction to biomedical science. An Open House/Student Showcase Night scheduled for April 2 is open to the public and will feature demonstrations and student projects for view. For more information visit the center online at www.huotech.org.

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