

Nuevo Latino goes formal

By Erica Schlaikjer
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Fifteen years ago, Italian food was all the rage. Then it was pan-Asian cuisine. Now, Chicago's restaurant scene is full of Latin-American flavor. But the trend doesn't just show up on your plate. It's also in the kitchen.

Food preparation and serving is one of the top five jobs among both foreign-born Hispanic men and U.S.-born Hispanic women in Chicago. But most work in low-paying, low-skilled jobs, like dishwasher and prep cook making \$8 an hour, rather than as managers or head chefs, who earn \$20 an hour or more. But as the Hispanic workforce grows, how will Chicago's restaurant industry change?

"Hopefully, we'll have more minorities heading the kitchen and being recognized for the new culinary movement we're heading to," says Edie Jimenez, 29, a first-generation Mexican-American and executive chef of Cuatro. The upscale restaurant, which has been serving "Nuevo Latino" fare in the South Loop since 2005, posted revenue of \$2.4 million last year.

Unlike Mr. Jimenez, who in 10 years worked his way up from cashier at Ranalli's pizzeria in Lincoln Park to line cook at Red Light in the West Loop before being named head chef at Cuatro in 2006, many Hispanic restaurant workers don't get the opportunity to take charge.

All 18 of Cuatro's back-of-the-house staff are Hispanic, hailing from Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Argentina and Mexico. To help them advance, the restaurant pays for four hours of English classes a week and their regular wages while they attend. The staff also earns more than the \$7.75 state minimum wage, averaging \$9 per hour.

With tuition assistance from Cuatro, Mr. Jimenez, who earns \$49,700 a year as head chef, is getting a bachelor's degree in culinary arts at Kendall College. "Education is key," he says. "If you have a good culinary background, you can go into any kitchen and cook anywhere."

FROM JOB TO CAREER

Formal culinary training has become increasingly popular for anyone trying to break into the food business, says Nicola Copeland, program coordinator for the Chicago office of Careers Through Culinary Arts Program, a non-profit that prepares high school students for college programs and careers in the restaurant and hospitality industry. "Formal training allows people to enter the industry as more than a line cook."

This year, the organization awarded 23 scholarships to Chicago Public Schools students, \$101,500 of which went to six Hispanic students. One got a full scholarship to St. Augustine College, which has offered a professional cooking program for Spanish speakers since 1984.

In August, the Uptown school will launch a revised curriculum that allows students to earn an associate's degree in culinary arts, with an emphasis on general education, like English and "Computer Literacy for Cooks," in addition to practical training in the kitchen.

The 62 credit hours required to graduate from the five-semester program is more extensive than getting a basic certificate in cooking, which requires only 24 credit hours.

So far, St. Augustine has certified more than 2,000 cooks. About 70% of them are employed, landing jobs as chefs at restaurants like the Signature Room atop the John Hancock Center, says Rafael Perez, 41, who graduated from St. Augustine's cooking program in 1987 and has been its chef instructor for 20 years. Others work for airlines, cruise ships and even hospitals.

"Cooking used to be a job, but now it's a career," Mr. Perez says.

He's seen many employers take advantage of low-wage Hispanic restaurant workers, but as time goes by, those employees are advancing to higher positions.

"With education and hard work, we can compete with anybody," he says.

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