

Training infused with

HISTORY, HERITAGE

Princeton Dining program honors authentic Indigenous cuisine



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Nothing brings history alive quite like the full sensory experience of smelling, seeing, tasting and learning about authentic cuisine – and hearing from the chef who authentically prepared it. The Princeton University community enjoyed this immersive experience while honoring Native American Heritage Month in November. The event, which will continue due to its enthusiastic campus-wide reception, offered not only a vital social and historical lesson for those who attended, but also provided a rich professional development opportunity for campus dining staff.

Executive Retail Chef Dan Maher, CEC, CCA, who helped organize the presentation and tasting portions of the event and who leads several internal employee training programs, said the event allows dining staff to learn new cuisines and new concepts.

“It really opens their eyes,” he said. “You get more of a history lesson, rather than just a recipe demonstration, and I think that always gets people a little more engaged.”

Princeton University has long celebrated its diverse student body during Native American Heritage Month, but last year, organizers went a step further. Native American Chef Walter Whitewater and Chef Lois Ellen Frank, PhD, were invited to campus and held a sampling, training, student discussion forum, reception and dinner for students, staff and faculty. The two-day event provided education and an authentic culinary experience of Native American cuisine.

The program carried on to celebrate Black History Month in February, with visiting chef and Princeton alumna Valerie Erwin, a Philadelphia chef and social activist. Princeton will celebrate Latinx Heritage Month next semester.

Renaë Hill, campus dining communications specialist, said the events were both beautiful and educational. Event organizers involved students in every aspect of the events to provide the best possible learning experience, from marketing to academics to social awareness.

“Students were really excited to ask questions and speak with the chefs and the dining team,” Hill said. “At the dinner, one of our speakers was a member of the student group, Natives at Princeton, who is writing a thesis on how food insecurity impacts traditional Native American culture.”

The presentation by Chefs Whitewater and Frank had a profound impact on both the students as well as the dining staff, who enjoyed a special training with the chefs between the busy lunch and dinner hours.

“It’s completely different learning from someone who has done this their whole life,” Maher said.



created during pandemic-era dining hall closures. This homegrown curriculum has since become an in-depth, three-part training program, including a culinary bootcamp in the summer, to help staff gain critical skills and advance their careers within Princeton Dining.

“It started as an opportunity to teach proper cooking techniques, flavorings and plate presentation,” Maher said, adding that it now also includes knife skills, hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP), advanced techniques and international cooking. “We’ve gotten ourselves to a point now where we try to do all of our recruiting for higher positions from within, so we try to give our employees a little more of a career path.”

This opportunity to learn and grow in their position keeps staff interested and improves retention at a time when the industry as a whole is struggling in this area, Maher said.

“Being able to teach our cooks new things, new cuisines, and giving them that time to experiment and learn is a big part of it,” he explained.

The training doesn't only help the chefs grow in their career, however. It also helps improve the quality of the work and efficiency of time and resources in daily operations. Chefs already know basics like what a “hard fry” is and how to cook a demi-glacé or marinara.

“It pays off for me and pays off for the other chefs,” Maher explained. “You’re not teaching all the tiny little details; they already have that foundation under them and understand the expectations. That gives us time to work with all the other cooks and team members, so it kind of gets everybody on the same even playing field.”

Lessons learned from the Native American Heritage presentation and programs that follow will continue to enrich the training and dining services with new authentic ingredients, diverse flavor profiles and an expanded perspective on culinary history and cultural experiences.

Learning how to prepare traditional Native American meals using authentic ingredients was a new experience for the staff, according to Maher. They learned how certain Native American dishes are cooked, the types of equipment used and some of the cuisine’s flavor profiles.

“Some of the feedback my staff had was that they never realized how different chilies were used at different points in the cooking process – adding different key flavor profiles such as smoky, spicy and earthy tones, and not just heat to a dish,” Maher said. “Some staff members also learned they enjoy game meats such as quail, elk and bison, which they had never tasted in the past.”

Incorporating these and other lessons from the event, Maher is adding Native American cuisine to his staff training program, which he originally

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Hill noted that the events unite many areas of campus, as well as the wider community. They hope to continue to fine-tune and improve the program.

“Everyone is learning so much throughout those three days that the chefs are here. Hopefully we can continue to grow it next year,” Hill said. “It’s just a great way to learn and also to bring so many different assets of the university community together.”

Chef Maher previously spent many years working in private restaurants, including as an owner. He said this program touches on what he appreciates most about working in collegiate dining—a benefit he also enjoys sharing with his staff.

“The most exciting thing about collegiate dining is the number of different cultures and different types of cuisine you can offer,” he said. “Typically, when you’re in restaurants, you have an identity, and you stick with that identity. Whereas here, we have such a diverse population of students, faculty and staff that we’ve gotten into a lot of different new and exciting cuisines—and the training and learning opportunities that go along with that.”



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