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Morning News

## Prison's chefs-in-training toil over tasty gourmet creations

### *Inmates learning trade in new culinary arts program*

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Deseret Morning News

*Published: December 8, 2007*

UTAH STATE PRISON — Thomas Powell has a dream he wants to live when he gets out of here.

"I plan on opening up my own restaurant, 'Fat Tom's,'" he said, smiling. "I've already got it pictured in my head what I want it to be. I want to serve southern Cajun."

The inmate, who has three years left on his aggravated assault sentence, said he is turning his life around in part because of a culinary arts program offered at the Utah State Prison's Promontory facility. Inmates are training to become chefs.

"They'll graduate with a degree. They'll have an associate of applied science and a certification from the National Restaurant Association," said chef Jackie Pappas. "You're going to be a chef. You're more than just a cook."

Tonight, the inmates will be put to the test: cooking Christmas dinner for dozens of corrections officers and employees.

"It's gonna be hectic," said inmate Joe Aiono.

The menu will include prime rib, chicken cordon bleu, a winter white salad, white asparagus with a white truffle sauce and a chocolate truffle cake. All of it will be made from scratch.

On Friday, the inmates were cutting endives, hand-breading chicken and putting cloves in oranges. Inmate Kevin Begay was carving butter sculptures. The gym down the hall was being decorated to serve as the dining room.

"It's gourmet. This is high-end stuff here," said inmate Jake Barney, who is serving time for robbery.

A culinary arts program has been in place at the Utah State Prison since 1995. However, this is the first time it is being offered for male inmates.

"We have a nationally accredited culinary program, under the guidance of the American Culinary Federation," said Ricco Renzetti, the program coordinator. "They have the same textbooks, the same curriculum as the students have on the outside."

The inmates pay tuition as they go through the two-year program. They have lab and nutrition classes and will learn about menus, business and marketing. They learn the hierarchy of the kitchen, addressing Pappas as "Chef!"

"When we come down here, it's like we're not even in prison anymore," Barney said. "When we come down here and we're with the chef, we give respect and we get respect. It's almost like we get to leave prison for a few hours each day."

The kitchen looks like a typical restaurant, but there are signs you are still in a prison. There's a wall

with outlines of the knives that are used in the class. They have to be issued, and the knives are tethered to the counters. The pots and pans are also inventoried, and Pappas sports a police radio over her chef's smock.

At the end of the day, the inmates present their culinary creations. Pappas samples them and offers critiques.

"Sometimes it's brutal. Sometimes it's lovely," she said.

Leftovers are saved for future classes, and most things are made from scratch. There are 20 inmates who are in the culinary arts program and another 35 on the waiting list. To get into the program, inmates have to rise to a certain level of classification in prison.

Pappas boasts that her students have near-perfect attendance and a 96 percent average score on their exams.

"The biggest challenge for me is juggling the treatment program with the culinary arts program," said Aiono, who has been in prison for the past six years for aggravated robbery.

Aiono has struggled with a Hollandaise sauce this semester.

"It took me four or five times to get it right," he admits. "There's a double-boil you have to do to get it right, and if you don't, you have to start over."

His final exam on Monday will likely be his biggest challenge: a chocolate souffle. Other inmates will be making delectables like stuffed pork chops and crab cakes.

Renzetti doesn't fear food poisoning and said he feels safer in the kitchen with the inmates than on the streets of Salt Lake City. This is the second multicourse gourmet meal the chefs-in-training have served to corrections employees. A Thanksgiving feast was well received. Powell even got rave reviews for his sweet potato pie.

"It makes me feel good just knowing I'm doing something positive for a change," Powell said. "I'm no longer a menace to society."

When they are released from prison, the inmates in this program will have a degree and a chance for a fresh start.

"They are acutely aware of the fact that some doors will be closed to them on the outside," Renzetti said. "They are also aware that some doors will be open to them because they've learned a marketable skill."

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