

# CCGA Culinary Students team with Nonprofit Food Pantry for Annual Cook-off

By ANNA HALL The Brunswick News

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Emily Axelson scooped out bites of grilled steak with hollandaise sauce, garlic green beans and kale chips, serving up an ample dish ready for a gourmet menu.

But instead of being placed on the list of options at a five-star restaurant, Axelson's gastronomic wonder was served in the middle of the College of Coastal Georgia's student center, representing the magic that can come from simple, classic ingredients.

While the ingredients in Axelson's dish may be mistaken for artisanal, high-priced fare, in truth, her dish was the exact opposite.

"All the main ingredients here — the steak, the green beans and kale, the base for the sauce — it all came from one place," Axelson said.



Rebecka Lytle, left, prepares crunchy bacon wrapped chicken while Emily Axelson works on steak with hollandaise sauce, lemon and garlic green beans and kale chips at the Cook-Off benefitting America's Second Harvest.  
Hannah Kicklighter/The Brunswick News

That place — America's Second Harvest of Coastal Georgia, a food pantry and safety net for thousands of children, senior citizens, low-income families and people with disabilities who are at-risk for hunger throughout southeastern Georgia.

Axelson was one of more than 20 students from the college to whip up bedazzled dishes Wednesday, as part of the school's culinary arts department cook-off event to benefit the food service nonprofit organization. From cabbages rolls, and bacon-wrapped chicken bites, to oxtail with rice and pineapple and black bean salsa, the midday food sampling brought out the creative skills of the school's first-year culinary students.

Now in its second year, the event commemorates the last class of the culinary students' first year. The food-fun day was lead by chemistry professor Andrea Wallace — who heads the student participants' chemistry 1100 course as part of the culinary program — along with culinary arts program coordinator Matthew Raiford and culinary arts assistant professor Steven Ingersoll.

While samples of dishes were again the headliner of the food-centric project, it likewise doubled as a way to raise funds, supplies and awareness about the local food pantry. Visitors donated a \$1 fee to eat away and vote on their top three favorite dishes. They were also asked to donate non-perishable food and pantry supplies to help stock the shelves of the food advocacy organization.

During the food sampling's first year, more than 100 guests gobbled up the students' fare. This year, Wallace estimates the number of attendees doubled.

"This is an event that not only helps our area food nonprofit help take care of those in need, it also helps our students find a sense of confidence in serving to the public and being creative in their recipes," Wallace said.

In April, students in the culinary arts chemistry 1100 course headed to the Second Harvest warehouse in Brunswick, where they chose ingredients for their dishes at the event. The rules were easy, in that at least 80 percent of their cook-off recipe was sourced from the food pantry. But the tactic in which the students chose their ingredients was a bit harder, as they entered into a mad scramble to beat the timer, and grab items that are often in high supply but low demand.

"It was very much like 'Top Chef'," said Kim Simmons, referring to the popular reality television cooking competition show. "I love 'Top Chef,' too, so being able to play out something like they would do, and then have it all go to a good cause, it's very rewarding. It's a great way to end a first year of culinary learning."

Simmons crafted a dish of Tex-Mex meatballs and rice.

For chef-to-be Ryan Ryerson, who cooked a pork fried rice recipe, seeing the inside of the food pantry and being able to use a unique take on standard ingredients was a challenge he was certainly up for taking. With the goal of some day opening his own barbecue joint, experimenting with different food components and arranging them in a new way only inspired him further down his culinary path in life.

"I think I might take the recipe I made here, and change it up, so when I have my own barbecue place, I can add it to somewhere on the menu," he said. "The thing about this was, you take these inexpensive ingredients, change them from something that didn't cost much and turn it all into something that would be on a higher-class menu. It was a real learning experience."

That, Raiford said, was the exact point. Every day, families in local communities and across the nation are faced with issues of hunger and limited food supplies. But opening minds to take inexpensive menu items, give them a new life, and create a healthy and affordable meal is a lesson that upcoming chefs need to know. They, too, need to be aware of the community around them, and give back with their own talents.

"This whole experience is a valuable learning opportunity for our future chefs," Raiford said. "They need to know about the people in their community, not just those who eat at their restaurants, but also about those who don't have the means to do so. They need to use their talents to give back, to be supportive of the places where they end up, and need to be able to stretch their minds and be creative with their recipes. This project is the perfect way to do all of that."