



# GENERATION NEXT IN THE KITCHEN

*Education Foundation programs succeed in sparking restaurant careers*

by Sonya Bice

**W**RA's Education Foundation invests in training and scholarship programs that encourage up and coming talent to choose foodservice careers in Wisconsin. There are winners all around: young professionals gain experience in some of Wisconsin's finest operations, employers hire skilled and motivated workers, and the industry is rapidly gaining a reputation as a hot career choice. Among the remarkable success stories is the Badger High School ProStart Team, Kendall Kelly, Clayton Maricle, Michael Pane and Jessica Bania, who won the national culinary title in the 2008 National ProStart Invitational.

ProStart, a college-prep, two-year curriculum for high school students, has grown over the past decade to more than 60 participating schools across the state, with more than 2000 students involved. Students who meet academic standards, complete a checklist of competencies, and participate in 400 or more hours of mentored work experience receive a National Certificate of Achievement.

The program has steadily gained a reputation with those in the community and with employers. The enthusiasm the program has generated has reenergized those in foodservice education and attracted media attention and strong community support.

ProStart instructor Betty Price was chatting with a community member she did not know well at a recent event where the Sheboygan South ProStart students were cooking. The person came back to her after watching the young people work. "I like your program and your students and how they carry themselves," she said. "I

want to support this. "Shortly thereafter, Price opened her mail and out fell a check for \$1000, earmarked for new uniforms for the students. "It doesn't happen often that you open an envelope and find a \$1000 check," Price said.

Barb Bruesewitz, the ProStart instructor at Wauwatosa East High School, got word recently that an area country club was looking for employees. Bruesewitz sent one of her ProStart students to interview; she was hired on the spot. The next day, Bruesewitz got an email from the chef: "Please send me more of the ProStart kids."

That initial contact was made possible by the network of professionals the WRA Education Foundation has tapped in support of the program.

And the testimonials from the students themselves are impressive.

Mike Farina, former student at Waukesha South, currently a student in his first year at Kendall College in Chicago, said, "My high school experience with ProStart was focused and exciting. The plate competitions offered me a challenge. I was introduced to menu planning, plating, teamwork, timing and leadership. The weeks of hard preparation before the competitions exposed me to the challenges of the industry. It was an exciting way to learn. ProStart enriched my education and helped me confirm my love for culinary arts." He won \$5,500 in scholarships last year from the WRA EF and NRAEF as a ProStart student.

Farina says ProStart gave him "a head start" in the culinary profession. "I was confident and prepared for my freshman year in culinary school. I had a foundation of knowledge to build on which has given me confidence in culinary school. ProStart gave me the opportunity to form

relationships with people in all aspects of the industry."

Pa Houa Vang, whose high school guidance counselor once recommended law school to her, says ProStart was decisive in her career choice. "It affected my career plans a lot actually," said Vang, currently a student at Johnson & Wales in Miami. She won \$3,000 in scholarships last year from the WRA EF as a ProStart student. "I was planning on majoring in the general field of science. ProStart helped me see my potential in the foodservice industry, and how willing others were to help me get started on such an amazing career."

Paulette Emberson, a ProStart instructor at Waunakee, said, "Several of my students have gone on to MATC-Madison for further study. One of my students graduating this year has been accepted into a French cooking school in Paris for next year."

The program opens students' eyes to hospitality management opportunities as well.

"It helps prepare them for careers by allowing them to explore various career paths that branch out from the broad hospitality field," said Cate Gasser, a ProStart instructor at Baraboo High School. "They are able to learn skills related to the front and back of the house, and they decide to investigate further education in culinary, baking or hospitality management careers." She has seen career decisions changed by the exposure to the program.

"I have had numerous students that never planned on going into a food service career and by the end of the school year, they discover it's something they have started to develop a love for," Gasser said. "One student was all set to go to MATC in welding and throughout the course of

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the year and being in co-op he decided he had some skills and really enjoyed being in the kitchen. So he changed his profession to a chef. That is just one example of many I have taught, and because of ProStart an interest was sparked.”

### Intense competitions

One of the components of ProStart is the high-energy competitions between teams of high school students. Teachers and students alike say the competitions are one of the favorite parts of the program. The ProStart Invitational has both a culinary and hospitality management competition. Green Bay Preble High School’s hospitality management team won state and went on to place sixth out of thirty teams at the national competition this year, the first time a Wisconsin team had broken into the top ten.

“The level of competition is unbelievable. It is amazing to see what the kids come up with. I have yet to see that level of competition at the high school level in any other area,” Bruesewitz said. The dedication of the students is impressive. The Wauwatosa East ProStart team does all of its competition preparation outside of the classroom, often staying after school until 6:30 or 7 P.M. and coming in on Saturdays. The week before competition, Bruesewitz practices with the students four hours every night.

Dedication like that from both students and instructors explains why Wisconsin teams have become formidable competitors. The state recently became the first to win two national titles in the National ProStart Invitational when the team from Badger High School won the 2008 national culinary title.

Badger team member Kendall Kelly plans to attend the Culinary Institute of America. She says she loves the intensity of the competition: “It’s the adrenaline rush – you can’t find that kind of experience very many places in high school.” For Clayton Maricle, the experience confirmed his interest in a hospitality career. “I really didn’t know what to do for a career. After the competition, it was just a no-brainer to pursue a career like this. The competitions are fun, and there are scholarship opportunities – that’s a good motivator, the money.” The other two team members are juniors and are still deciding their career plans.

### Mentoring relationships are key

“One of the big things is that they get to work with mentors,” said Bruesewitz. “The executive chef and the pastry chef at Eddie Martini’s came in to the classroom – the kids were excited and totally intimidated at first. But it was wonderful to watch them develop those relationships.”

Chef Jeremy Thoren, executive chef and wine director at Buck Rub Restaurant, Wautoma, has worked as a mentor with students at Wautoma and has supported the program both financially and with his time. “This year I donated 36 chef coats and two butane burners they use in competitions. I started out teaching them knife skills and food handling. I plan on helping out more extensively next year. What I did was have them all come out here and cook in our kitchen. It gives them an idea of what it is really like to do this.”

Thoren, who has hired three kids from the ProStart program, says the program gives the students an idea of what it is really like to work in the industry. “Some of them may start out thinking, ‘oh, this is an easy class.’ But then they see how hard it is. It gives them a good start and lets them get their feet wet.”

Chef Joe Rodriguez, of the Lake Geneva Country Club, says the relationships built between the students and mentors help the young people by giving them real-world connections with professionals, rather than the stereotypes they see in the media.

“It’s a great program,” he said. “I wish they’d had it when I was younger. It helps them, and it helps me because when I go into the classroom I meet kids who want a summertime job or a part-time job. I meet them face to face and get to know them. That creates a connection. You know, kids are sometimes afraid that they will have a boss with a hot temper, like Gordon Ramsay, so it helps to meet them in person.”

### A strong and growing reputation

Russ Tronsen, the ProStart instructor at Badger High whose team took the national culinary title this year, says ProStart is “a brand name that schools and industry recognize.”

That recognition brings in the mentors from the business community, draws media attention, gains parent support, and gives the students employment opportunities they wouldn’t have otherwise.

Karen Sullivan has been teaching the ProStart curriculum for eight years. Sullivan said that the program’s reputation helps in placing students in jobs. “We have really good community and business connections,” Sullivan said. Among the businesses supporting the program is the American Club, where some of Sullivan’s students work and one has been offered an apprenticeship.



Adam Prochaska, Veronica Steeno, Iraidy Gonzalez and Brittany Thompson celebrate Green Bay Preble’s First Place management competition win at the state ProStart® Invitational. Preble went on to place sixth at the National Competition in San Diego.

The program at Sheboygan North High School where Sullivan teaches has grown from 10 to 16 sections. Some of the enthusiasm for the program undoubtedly grew from Sheboygan North’s high-profile competition wins; the school won the national culinary title in 2005. “We never envisioned that it would get this big,” Sullivan said.

Tronsen mentioned television’s influence as one factor in the popularity of the program with students: “Obviously, Food Network dramatically increased the awareness of culinary careers. I think it was a combination of the right program and the right timing – coming at the same time

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that television coverage of food careers was taking off.”

He said the program is much more relevant to employers than the previous curriculum was. “Before ProStart, I taught regular foodservice classes, but that did not open up too many doors to jobs or post-secondary education. As an instructor, it was a hard sell to go to a high-end operation and try to get them to hire high school students.”

Betty Price, a ProStart instructor at Sheboygan South High School, says, “ProStart has brought the level of education and the level of students up. It adds a lot more credibility. Students who wouldn’t have taken the class before because it was considered ‘fluff’ take it now because there’s a direction to go for a career. You are getting a better caliber of students, who are ambitious and have more goals. Plus, the program establishes goals and direction in their lives. This provides an avenue for students who want to work with their hands and also their minds, and gives them a way to succeed and obtain scholarships.” She said for the most part, her students have

chosen to stay in Wisconsin. Using the training they received, they have “found a niche in the community,” working at local bakeries or independent restaurants. For some, though, “it broadens their horizons and gives them courage to try new things and go new places.”

The teachers speak highly of the training the program provides them as well. Bruesewitz says, “The support from the WRA Education Foundation is just fabulous. Every summer they have workshops with experts – you leave there with something new. For a teacher to be able to be taught by chefs who are working every single day, that’s valuable. You have a place to go with your questions, and it keeps you up to date on things like food borne illnesses.”

Emberson said she likes the curriculum because “it helps me focus on what the industry is expecting of our students. I like the easy to read format. Often times, I add the foodservice trade journals as well for the students to read. All the materials work together to help give the students a

well rounded education.”

Bruesewitz credits the program with giving young people a chance they don’t often get: “We’re letting them ‘test-drive’ a career. It helps them narrow down their career choices,” she adds. “We get extremely positive feedback from parents. The kids who complete the certificate, those are the kids who are driven, who have a career goal. It has really crystallized for them.”

### Scholarships

The ProStart program dovetails with the Education Foundation’s other major initiative, which is funding an extensive scholarship program that opens doors for talented students to pursue post-secondary culinary education. The WRA EF has given out over \$500,000 in scholarships since 1987. The ProStart competitions make available thousands more in scholarships directly from culinary schools and hospitality management colleges for winning students. As Emberson says, “The students are amazed at the dollars available to them.” **WR**



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