



REALLY COOKIN'

New AV systems help Elgin culinary center offer state-of-the-art training

When Chef Mike Zema put out his wish list for equipment in the new Elgin Community College Culinary Arts Center, it wasn't just sharp knives, fancy cookware and commercial grade ovens. He also included LCD monitors and projectors, AMX controls, DVD players, cameras, wireless mics and a host of other audio-visual equipment that makes a culinary class at ECC a work of art.

The \$4.1 million project, completed in August, 2004, called for the remodeling of 4,500 square feet of existing space and the construction of an additional 16,500 square feet. The new space includes two demonstration classrooms, two baking classrooms, offices, locker rooms, and a Showcase Kitchen open to school's Spartan Terrace Restaurant, which has tripled in size and can now hold over 150 guests.

This technology-rich program includes \$500,000 worth of new kitchen equipment, \$100,000 in new furniture and another \$284,000 incorporating the best in audio-visual technology in its efforts to stay out in front of the culinary competition. Zema took a sabbatical to work with the project's strategy committee, which included ECC technology director Jeff Metzger.

Fancy footwork controls the system

"In the old days we used to use a reflective mirror above a cook surface, so everyone could see," said Metzger. But with larger classes and more ambitious instructional goals, that's no longer enough. "I thought at first we would just put up some projectors and screens and a basic sound system," said Tom Allison of Sound Vision, Inc. of Elgin, which designed, built and installed the a/v systems. Such a simple system lets everyone see what the instructor is working on in the two baking classrooms, but in the demonstration classrooms, where more elaborate meals are prepared, a series of overhead vent hoods would have blocked the line of site for students standing at their workstations.

Instead, Sound Vision mounted six LCD monitors in front of the student cook stations, taking a signal from a camera aimed at the instructor's demonstration area. With the visual displays in front of them and sound from a wireless mic, students can follow what the instructor is doing while at work on their own culinary creations.

An AMX touch panel at the front of each room integrates all the complex AV components into a system that's easily operated. For instance, it's easy for the instructor to zoom in and out on the meal he's preparing, change camera angles, call up a DVD or PowerPoint presentation, or even post a recipe without ever using his hands for anything but cooking. The instructor can see his choices for camera presets or auxiliary sources on the panel at his cook station, but choose the one he wants using one of nine foot



Above: the dining room and two of its three projection screens, with the Showcase Kitchen in the background. At right: the Showcase Kitchen, with its foot pedal controls on the floor and an AMX touch screen control panel on the counter.



pedals mounted at the floor. "Because they're cooking they don't want to touch the panel and get food or germs on it," said Allison. "The foot pedals can be preset, and he can start or stop a dedicated camera that will videotape the whole lesson."

A similar foot pedal system is available in the Showcase Kitchen, where visiting chefs on an elevated stage complete with stove, grill and oven, can cook a meal and share techniques with dinner guests in the Spartan Terrace Restaurant. Every move the chef makes, no matter how subtle, is captured by two overhead cameras, one for close-ups and one for a long shot. The signals are sent to a trio of ceiling-mounted projectors aimed at motorized screens at strategic points around the room. Even when the restaurant is filled to capacity, everyone can see exactly what the chef is doing.

While the guest chef is on stage, culinary students are preparing the same meal behind the scenes in the main kitchen, only more of them. "There are eight ceiling speakers so they can hear what's going on and they are in sync with him," said Allison. "We installed wireless mics in every room in the center. The chef can say the dessert is finished and they serve the dessert right on cue."

Visiting chefs without fancy footwork need not be intimidated, however. A wireless touch panel mounted at the back of the dining room allows someone else to call the shots. "An assistant could run the show so the guest chef who comes in from France doesn't have to be fluent in the system," said Allison. "There's also a small touch panel in the wait staff station with a CD player so they can hit a button and control the music, or bring up the lights."

A commercial grade wireless intercom system with three headsets is also installed so the maitre'd and others behind the scenes can communicate without having to run back and forth to the restaurant. "We put a lot of thought into what's going to be the most user friendly," said Metzger, who is planning to train 15 or 20 people on the system so they will have plenty of backup if necessary.

Distance learning

There are even grander plans for the Showcase Kitchen. ECC sends a small group of students to Austria each year in a culinary exchange program. "The plan is to allow us to transmit anywhere in the world," said Zema. "When our exchange students come here and do demonstrations we can transmit back to Austria and vice versa." Zema also sees an opportunity for Middleby Corporation to demonstrate its new products in the kitchen to potential clients. One of the largest commercial food equipment manufacturers in the country, Middleby donated or discounted much of the new cooking equipment for the culinary center. ECC has counted on a number of community partners to make the project happen and stay within budget.

"The culinary program can be an expensive program to operate," said Zema. "If we do a visiting chef dinner the funds are used to support scholarships and competition teams. What's also unique is we have a retail store. Customers or faculty can stop by and get something to take home for dinner." The packaging, pricing and selling of the products they cook is all part of the learning process. Culinary Arts classes teach everything from food buying



Top: one of the baking classrooms with its projection system. Immediately above: the demonstration classrooms features overhead hood vents for the student cooking workstations, necessitating individual LCD monitors.

and preservation, sanitation, and restaurant management to preparation and presentation. 350 students will be entering culinary classes this fall and Zema says 35% of them are career changers. It's a good mix. "Some have the passion, but not the knowledge," said Zema. "You get a kid who loves to cook and loves people and the flame gets lit and then gets brighter. I see a lot of "me's" out there. I never thought a kid from the south side of Chicago would be doing this." Zema expects the interest in culinary arts to continue growing as the population gets older and lives longer. After all, everybody eats.

"What's amazing to me is the number of people going to proprietary schools and plunking down twenty or thirty thousand dollars when there are just as many community colleges offering culinary arts," said Zema, who is both professor and coordinator of the Culinary Arts Management program. "I don't mean to knock proprietary schools, but we're all doing the same stuff. We're all using the same materials. Nobody is sautéing any different." For prospective students unsure where to go his advice is, sample the wares. "Just ask, can I come in and spend the day with your students in the program? You know who's really going to tell you what it's like? The student standing next to you. I don't just let visitors stand around. I put them to work."

The ECC Culinary Arts Program has won more than its share of awards over the years, including last year's Junior Culinarian of the year at the American Culinary Federation Conference. Former student Laura Bellus-Kaltenecker defeated other young chefs from both private and public culinary schools for the honor. ECC's Culinary Arts and Hospitality Institute, however, is not about to rest on its laurels. With a new home, new equipment and technology that brings it to the next level, the Culinary Arts curriculum at ECC is ready to take off. Zema is proud to say "Our school is as good as any school out there. Everybody's cookin'!"



Left column: touch panel used in the demo and baking classrooms; camera used in the demo classrooms and Tartan Dining Room; rack from a demo classroom; foot pedals used throughout the facility. Right column: main rack housing the sound and control systems; camera from a baking classroom; wall-mounted control panel from the back of the dining room.

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