

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

## Aspiring chefs sharpen trade at Pittsburg bistro

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PITTSBURG — For aspiring chefs like Alexandra Chua, downtown's newest restaurant is a bit of a pressure cooker.

Chua recently graduated from the Contra Costa College Culinary Arts Program in Pittsburg. Much of her experience came from the hands-on instruction she got whipping up dishes and handling customer feedback and complaints at Restaurant 615.

The gourmet bistro doubles as a place where people can get a meal and where aspiring chefs can cut their teeth. Chefs get more experience at Restaurant 615 than at a traditional program, said executive chef Patrick Robertson.

"There is a definite learning curve for some of them that is found out here, a sense of urgency they don't get elsewhere," Robertson said.

"They feel the heat of working in the kitchen," said Mark Bolourchi, president of Pacific Plaza Imports Inc. and owner of the building. Robertson leases the building space from him.

Last year, Bolourchi, a distributor of caviar and gourmet foods with headquarters in Pittsburg, decided to rehabilitate the empty building to create the bistro and culinary school. Pittsburg leaders loaned Bolourchi nearly \$1 million in redevelopment money for the project.

Since opening in September, the bistro has been great for several reasons, City Manager Marc Grisham said. The restaurant is a unique business that attracts visitors, he said. Further, students using the school are "learning a valuable skill and profession and how to run "the entire business of a restaurant."

"Plus, they're going to the bank to deposit their checks or going to other stores" downtown, which creates more foot traffic, he said.

Contra Costa College expanded into Pittsburg to meet a growing demand of interested chefs in the East Contra Costa area, said Nader Sharkes, head instructor at the college's culinary arts program. There has been a good response considering limited advertisement, though more emphasis needs to be placed on telling high school counselors the program is available, he said.

Lena McCloy, who manages the students in the class, graduated from Robertson's program. Restaurant 615 is a full-fledged restaurant while the restaurant at Contra Costa College in San Pablo is for students only.

The community has given "a lot of positive response" to the school, McCloy said. "Many are surprised that these are students," she said.

Restaurant 615 has a local focus. The bistro features donated historical pictures of downtown, along with beers and wine from within 200 miles and locally grown products that Robertson finds at farmers markets, he said. The idea is to reduce the carbon footprint.

The restaurant also features an open kitchen and a large flat-screen television, which shows students and patrons what work is being done in the kitchen.

Lunchtime crowd sizes have varied. Last week, Dale Mardiros, of Lafayette, and Eric Rehn, of Clayton, were two of just a handful in the restaurant. They said the food was fantastic and the prices reasonable. It was hard to believe the place was in Pittsburg, they said, noting it will help to change the perception of the community.

Classes are set to start up for the next semester in late January, Robertson said. He also hopes to set up classes for the public in the spring.