

DAILY NEWS

May 31, 2009

Cooking up job training in L.I.C

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Darly Corniel (far right) is the director of the program at the Artisan Baking Center.

When Jonathan Bates lost his catering job in the Bronx last fall, he was determined not to become another casualty of the economic downturn.

He found just the kind of job training he was looking for - and eventually a new gig - at an innovative culinary program in Long Island City called the Artisan Baking Center.

"Instead of sitting at home and doing nothing, I decided to learn new things," said Bates, who can now bake wedding cakes, croissants, pastries and an array of different breads.

The center, located in an unassuming office building on 37th St., also lets chefs rent out its professional kitchens for their businesses.



Students preparing baked goods in the kitchen at Artisan Baking Center in Long Island City.

Bates, 31, was among a baker's dozen who graduated Thursday from a six-week baking course at the center. He's been hired to oversee its four well-equipped kitchens during evenings and weekends, when small business owners rent the space.

The center is funded by the city and provides unemployed or underemployed New Yorkers with training in both culinary and baking skills.

It shares space with the Kitchen Incubator, which rents out the kitchens to about 45 startup food businesses.

"The building has a very different ambience in the morning than it does in the evening," said Kathrine Gregory, the Incubator's director. "But it's very symbiotic."

The people who attend the classes during the day are taught to use the facility's equipment and sharpen their cooking skills.

"And throughout the process, we are constantly helping them look for jobs," said Darly Corniel, the program's coordinator.

Chefs use the kitchens at night and on weekends to make everything from hummus to pastries.

Jill Fretchman, 29, began using the Incubator in 2005 to start Jill's Fretzels, an online chocolate-covered pretzel business.

Health Department rules prohibit chefs like Fretchman from working at home, but the cost of renting out a kitchen is too steep for many startups.

"This kitchen is great because I only pay for it when I need it and I don't have to pay for its maintenance," Fretchman said.

Kitchen space costs \$180 for a night shift, from 6:30 p.m. to 2:30 a.m., or \$220 for a weekend shift.

"It's a very fiscally prudent way to start a business," Gregory said.

Not only does Fretchman get to use top-of-the-line kitchen equipment and an air-conditioned room where her chocolate stays the right consistency, she happened to hire three employees from the Artisan Baking Center.

When she launched her pretzel business, Fretchman could not afford help. Now she has four employees, three of whom she met when they were working as kitchen managers.

"Here, we have a built-in pool of food-trained staff who are specially trained in the facility," Gregory said.

Students come out of the Artisan Baking Center's programs with a new repertoire of recipes and the skills to use industrial kitchen equipment.

Student Andrea Nebblett, 26, said she brings the recipes she learns in class back to try out at Conrad's Bakery in Brooklyn, where she works.

She graduated from culinary school in September, but Nebblett said her time at the Artisan Baking Center makes her feel more ready to open her own bakery some day.

"Here, it's a team production," she said. "It's really real-world."