

East Tech students serve community with teaching kitchen



Brittany Ervin



Students at East Technical High School on Cleveland's East Side are gaining hands-on culinary and hospitality experience by operating the Executive Grille, a student-run restaurant that serves both the school community and the public.

Inside the dining room, students move between the kitchen and tables, serving meals they prepared themselves, while instructors guide them through the pace of a working restaurant.

Through the Cleveland Metropolitan School District's culinary arts program, students learn cooking techniques, food safety, teamwork, and customer service while preparing meals. The restaurant operates as a working classroom where students manage both the kitchen and dining room under the guidance of instructors.

The program is led by culinary instructor Michael Szalkowski, who has worked with the program since 1999 and Jonathan Gardner, a chef and program graduate who has taught there for the past five years.

Students say the experience requires discipline, responsibility and teamwork. While preparing food for customers can be demanding, many say they enjoy learning to cook dishes from different cultures and gaining confidence in the kitchen.

"It's not all fun and games," Nate, a student, said. "It takes hard work and attention to safety, but it's rewarding when people enjoy the food."

Gardner said his interest in cooking began during large family gatherings.

"Sunday dinners brought everyone together," Gardner said. "Now I enjoy helping students see food from a different perspective and giving them responsibility when they cook for the public."

He said challenges in the kitchen often become learning opportunities.

Szalkowski said the restaurant environment allows students to gain practical experience beyond traditional classroom instruction.

"When students discover something they're good at, they thrive," he said.



Executive Grille students and Instructor Michael Szalkowski and chef Jonathan Gardner (Right) Credit Ron Calhoun



East Technical High School Executive Grille. Credit Ron Calhoun

A program with decades of history

The culinary arts program originally began at Jane Addams Business Careers Center in 1997, followed by the opening of the Executive Grille restaurant in 1998.

The program moved to East Technical High School after the Jane Addams campus closed in 2021.

In February 2023, the Executive Grille opened its current facility inside East Tech.

The restaurant operates in a renovated space that was built over the building's former swimming pool area and now includes a modern commercial kitchen, buffet area and dining room for guests.

Students manage both the kitchen and dining room, preparing meals, greeting customers, serving tables and assisting with daily operations.

Learning through service

The Executive Grille also hosts themed events and special meals throughout the school year. At a recent Soul Food Banquet, students prepared dishes including shrimp and grits, barbecue chicken, macaroni and cheese, candied yams, and peach cobbler.

Events like these allow students to practice menu planning, food preparation, and customer service while serving members of the community.

For students interested in culinary careers, the opportunity to cook for real customers provides valuable experience.

Szalkowski said the hands-on environment helps students discover talents they may not have realized they had.

"The goal is to give them skills they can carry into the workforce or further education," he said.

For many students, the Executive Grille offers a chance to explore culinary careers while serving the community. It also gives students opportunities to travel.

They recently visited Disney and attended the Food & Wine Festival at Epcot. The program has helped students step outside their comfort zones and create valuable experiences to build on. "If you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life," Szalkowski said.

Visiting the Executive Grille

The Executive Grille is open to the public on Wednesdays and Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. during the school year.

East Technical High School Executive Grille
2439 E. 55th St.
(rear lot entrance)
Cleveland 44104
 216-838-CHEF (2433)

Reservations are recommended.

More information: Executive Grille website, <https://grille.clevelandmetroschools.org/>

The program is part of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District's career and technical education pathway for students in grades 10 through 12, designed to help students explore careers in the culinary and hospitality industries.

Graduates often continue their education in culinary programs or pursue careers in restaurants, bakeries, hospitality management and food service operations.

Join Team TCO

Now hiring in several positions.
 Independent Contractors:

PRINT-LAYOUT DESIGNER
 VIDEOGRAPHER
 SALES REPRESENTATIVE

WEBSITE MANAGER
 JOURNALIST
 REPORTER

www.cleobserver.com

