

Stelly's Commercial Kitchen

by Paula Kully

..... Many years ago, I spent a year up north working at "Junction 37 Services," a small tourist and truck stop. It consisted of a gas station, restaurant and gift shop located, as the name indicated, at the junction of highway 37 and the Alaska Highway just west of Watson Lake, Yukon.

For the most part, I worked in the kitchen doing prep or waiting tables, but occasionally I had the opportunity to cook. I was terrified. I thought that it would be hard to keep up with orders, but it turned out to be far easier than cooking at home because everything is bigger, accommodating, and well organized. There is no messing around with little frying pans or stuffing a big roaster into a too-small oven.

Monika Gysler, the instructor for the Culinary Arts Program at Stelly's Secondary School, confirms that cooking in a commercial kitchen may seem intimidating, but everything is streamlined and set up to handle large quantities at a fast pace. This is what sets a commercial kitchen apart from your home kitchen.

Monika has been running the school's Culinary Arts program for the past six years. She began her career in teaching with aspirations of becoming an art teacher but soon discovered that there were limited opportunities in this direction, so she ended up as a home economics teacher. This branched off into the culinary arts, which she has found to be her passion.

The program is one that students from grades nine to 12 can take as an "option," or as part of the practical arts course. It attracts a large number of international students, which makes for an even greater learning experience as they enthusiastically share recipes from their own countries.

However, learning to be a chef and to work in a commercial kitchen involves more than cooking. The curriculum begins with Food Safe, an essential basic to working anywhere in the food industry. The course covers important food safety and worker safety information such as foodborne illness, receiving, storing and preparing food, cleaning and sanitizing.

The design of the commercial kitchen lends to its ease of use with eight basic elements ensuring its functionality: receiving (where supplies are brought into the kitchen); storage; refrigeration; prep and cooking; cleanup (dishwashers, sinks, etc.); space; lighting and flooring. Various workstations, each with its own purpose and organized to suit the needs of the activity, are incorporated into the kitchen's layout. Stelly's kitchen has four main stations. These are the

entrée station, grill station, cold sandwich station and bakery station.

Some of the key pieces of equipment in the kitchen at Stelly's include six burner gas stoves, a barbecue and flat-top grill, a convection oven, two standard ovens, a large steamer, a steam table that holds foods above 60°C, and numerous pots, pans, utensils and catering dishes. Students learn how to operate and use all of the equipment in the kitchen safely and properly.

The culinary arts program operates much like a business and is relatively self-sufficient. Catering as well as breakfast and lunch service at the school cafeteria generate revenue to purchase supplies and food. Students work in teams to prepare and serve the meals as part of the curriculum. In addition, the school district subsidizes the program by covering the cost of equipment maintenance.

Stelly's is also involved in a provincial program called "Take a Bite Out of BC" where local producers donate quality products to the culinary arts program. The school receives a minimum of \$2,000 per year in products that range from turkey, salmon, flats of tomatoes, berries, cheese and more. The students never know what they will receive, and it gives them the opportunity to experiment with fresh, locally produced food.

Not all who take the culinary arts course intend on pursuing a career as a chef, but it inspires some to go into the field. At the very least, the program provides students with a food safe certificate and a fun, valuable experience they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. ✨

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