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Feast | In the Kitchen by Stephanie Obodda

Friend of the House

Raul Figueroa of the Amos House's Friendship Café prepares students for the real world

Amos House is a social service agency that provides assistance to the homeless and poor. How does the Friendship Café integrate with your mission?

Amos House's Culinary Education program provides 12 weeks of culinary training with the goal of job placement in the restaurant industry. During the program, students can choose between an internship at our catering company (More Than a Meal Catering) or the café. Most of them have never worked at a restaurant, so this is their first experience in a professional kitchen.

After the students graduate, they'll continue here for less than four months as they look for permanent job opportunities. As students complete their internship, we help them build their resume and life skills. One of the students got a job after working here for only one week. We miss him in the kitchen, but it's great.

Do you enjoy working with the students?

Definitely. Their attitudes are great, and everyone's willing to learn. They have fun, and there is a lot of laughter in the kitchen. I love the progress I can see by spending every single day with them. As they become more familiar with the café, they have a lot of great suggestions for improvement. For example, one student, Denise, saw that we had some extra potatoes and asked if she could make a potato salad. She came up with a great recipe using ingredients we already had in the kitchen, and we've been serving it with sandwiches for lunch. This really gave her confidence. After that day, she has been taking charge more in the kitchen. Their relationship with me is less supervisor/student than equal partner. I value their ideas and want them to take charge once in a while.

What path led you to the Friendship Café?

Before I came here, I had been working in the restaurant industry for about 10 years. I started in New York, where I worked in a variety of restaurants, from fine dining to small cafes. I've cooked French, Italian and even sushi. When I got the call about this opportunity, I was working in Boston and



had just been offered a promotion. It was a hard decision. I knew the café would be more work, but it would give me the opportunity to get out of the kitchen and interact with people, hear their stories. I'm very happy I decided to come here.

How did you go about designing the menu?

Before we opened, I walked around the neighborhood asking people what kind of food they thought was missing in this area. I was a bit surprised (and excited) that the overwhelming response was "healthy." Many people complained that there was too much fast food in the neighborhood and that it was difficult to find food that isn't fried, like a good salad. One woman requested "anything but burgers." People also asked for breakfast food, as well somewhere to sit down and have a relaxing meal. And then there were the really specific requests - like this one Peruvian dish, which I'd love to serve if it didn't take all day to make.

Now that we're open, our regulars sometimes make great suggestions. Often, we'll try out a request as a special and see how it works. Soon, I want to start adding the best ones to the menu. We have a very diverse customer base, so it's been a chal-

lenge adjusting the menu so there's something for everyone.

What's next for the café?

We're going to start a new program: Amos House Bakes. We hired a new business manager, Rob, to manage the catering division; he's a baker. Our oven broke recently at the café, but once we get it fixed, we're going to be doing a lot of baking in house and you'll be able to pick up boxes of baked goods to take home.

Over the next weeks, I'm also going to start adding some Latin dishes to the menu. They're a personal favorite and also a big request within the community. First up, I'm planning to serve some eggrolls with a kick as well as hot tamales.

We're going to start our guest chef dinners soon. We'll be able to showcase great area chefs while giving students the opportunity to see what it's like to work with a different personality.

**Friendship
Café**

500 Broad Street
223-1700

www.friendshipcaferi.com