

French Chef Exchange Program

By Maura Nelson

In 1985 Des Moines acquired a Sister-City in St-Etienne, France. Since 1986 Des Moines Area Community College has hosted a French Chef Exchange. Each year in January, two chefs from L'Association des Cuisiniers de la Loire (the Chefs' Association from the St-Etienne region) come to DMACC's Iowa Culinary Institute as guest lecturers for the Culinary Arts Program.

For two weeks, the chefs demonstrate techniques of classical French cuisine to all of our culinary arts students and faculty. Demonstrations are held twice a day in the ICI's demonstration kitchen on the Ankeny campus. A bilingual interpreter facilitates communication between the chefs and the audience, allowing students and faculty to ask questions about cooking techniques, as well as questions relating to cultural differences between France and the United States. The guest chefs also plan the menu for the two January French gourmet dinners, (part of the ICI's annual Gourmet Dinner Series) and the students prepare this meal under the guest chefs' supervision.

In May, our top graduates have an opportunity to visit with ICI faculty and donors. It has been my great pleasure, as DMACC's French Professor and Coordinator of the French Chef Exchange, to be able to plan and lead our annual trip to France. I try to give our students special opportunities, such as cooking with Chef Alain Llorca at his 2-starred Michelin restaurant in Provence or tasting and learning about oysters with Chef Emmanuel Tessier in Cancale, Brittany where France's best oyster beds are located.

Our students spend twelve days traveling in Paris and other regions of France, where they are able to visit open-air food markets, vineyards, and wine châteaux; dine at and tour the kitchens of Michelin-starred restaurants; take a cooking class at the Cordon Bleu; and learn about French history and culture on their tours. Afterwards, they go to the St-Etienne region to serve individual culinary apprenticeships in restaurants of chefs from the Loire Association. These cooking internships run for approximately two weeks.

When the ICI students return, many of them are employed by the better restaurants and private clubs in the Central Iowa region. They return with enhanced job résumés because of this incredible opportunity.

In order to fund the French Chef Exchange, a group of community members have formed a special fundraising committee. Known as the Friends of the French Chefs, many of these people have accompanied the staff and students on trips to France and have been loyal supporters of our Gourmet Dinner Series at the ICI. Recognizing the importance of this program, they organize the

main fundraising project—our annual springtime Fleur de Lys Gala and Auction, where local hotels, restaurants, and merchants donate goods and services to be auctioned off to participants. Proceeds from the Fleur de Lys Gala fund the French Chef Exchange, with some money used to help defray the students' cost of their trip to France, as well as pay for the travel and expenses of our visiting French guest chef lecturers. The first auction netted \$6000 for the program; in 2014, we made a record-breaking \$115,000 for the exchange!

In 2009, a scholarship was set up in honor of Chef Anderson's late mother. The Marge Anderson French Culinary Scholarships are awarded annually to eight ICI graduates, based on a competition that includes several criteria, including academic grades and culinary skills. In 2014, \$72,000 was awarded to the winning students, providing all-expense paid trips to France, including the internships.