

Students Get Taste Of Life As A Chef

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The pressure felt among the group of eighth grade students was clear.

They had less than 10 minutes to create a dessert that not only tasted great, but looked great. And, what's more, National Conference Center's Executive Chef Craig Mason would judge their creations.

The young cooks picked partners and got to work.

Some stacked puff pastry like Lincoln logs and drizzled it in chocolate. Others placed just one pastry on the plate with a dollop of whipped cream, following the "less is more" philosophy. The winning pair, Spencer Hong and Waleed Elrefai, crisscrossed two puff pastries with white chocolate straws, and carefully placed sliced strawberries on the side.

"This is good," Spencer said as he dove into his creation with a fork.

The students spent part of Wednesday morning at the National Conference Center to get a taste of what life is like for a real chef. The crash course in dessert making was paired with a math lesson, of sorts, as the students learned how to buy ingredients on a budget.

The workshop is part of a business-school partnership between the conference center and Belmont Ridge Middle School. Each month, students visit the center to get a behind-the-scenes look at business operations and various aspects of the hospitality industry. The partnership is in its fourth year.

Jennifer Byrne, the middle school's eighth-grade dean, said she's seen the monthly workshops not only teach the students how to plan and organize, but also inspired some of them to consider pursuing a career in event planning or, for at least one student, a career as a chef.

"I would love to be a chef," eighth-grader Haley Shelberg said. "I cook a lot at home--mostly desserts."

Middle school is not too soon to begin thinking about a career; Mason said he knew he wanted to be a chef by the time he was in eighth grade.

"We had a rule in my house that we either had to clean the dishes or help with dinner," he continued. "I hated to do the dishes, so I learned how to cook. It eventually developed into this."

The business-school partnership's monthly workshops will continue through the end of the school year.

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