

A Passion for Food Preparation

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Ruralite

Culinary Classes Give Students Options at Home and in the Job Market

Story and photos by Craig Reed



Douglas High School's reestablished culinary program is popular, drawing 90 students from all grade levels. During a recent class, students prepared an Asian-inspired soup.

From boiling water to filling their bread bowls with chicken fettuccine alfredo, students in Douglas High School's culinary classes are learning to fix their own meals.

Several years after discontinuing classes once labeled as home economics, Douglas High established a culinary program last September. Instructor Casey O'Toole has taught kitchen and food skills to 90 students in 5 daily classes.

Students have prepared and cooked many dishes and desserts, including giant chocolate cookies, peppermint fudge, and, most recently, an Asian-inspired soup made with shabu beef strips, vegetables, and ramen noodles. The soup began a world tour of foods. Students

prepared Asian foods for a few weeks before moving on to European cuisine.

“I want kids to gain a passion for food and preparing food for themselves or their families,” says Casey, a 1995 Douglas High graduate who returned to the school to teach after years in the food and beverage industry as a bartender, barista, cook, and restaurant owner. “I want them to see they can make healthy food and make it tasty.”

Casey hopes his students realize the kitchen and food skills they learn in high school can lead to entry into a culinary program or secondary education degree, followed by a food or hospitality job.

“The job opportunities are unlimited,” Casey says. “The food and hospitality industries are huge. These classes are teaching them how to cook for themselves but are also some beginning steps if they’re interested in these industries.”

Longtime teacher Vi Jobb previously taught home ec classes at Douglas High. After Vi retired, so did the classes.

“I think it’s great for kids to have options,” says Winston-Dillard School District Superintendent Kim Kellison. “We’re trying to create programs that provide skills for the workplace. It’s also a real economic advantage to be able to cook for yourself. We’re super excited to have that program. I think it’s important for the kids and the community.”

There are 6 workstations in the kitchen classroom, limiting each class to 18 students. Each of the 5 classes is full.

“I wanted to take this class because I want to cook on my own when I live by myself,” says senior Brooklyn Wilson. “I want to make good meals that are not microwaved.”

Brooklyn says she has learned how to cook foods at the right temperature to kill any bacteria, how to substitute ingredients when something isn’t available, how to safely store foods and leftovers, and how to fix nutritious foods.

“I’ve learned stuff I didn’t think I would need to know,” she says. “It’s fun to cook in a group, seeing how others do it, seeing trial and error, and trying not to make the same mistakes.”

Colby O'Toole, a senior and Casey's son, says he learns something new in the class every day.

"We've learned how to use mixers, ovens, even down to boiling water," Colby says. "The program opens up new opportunities for students that hadn't been available earlier. We'll be getting food-handler cards in the next few weeks so students can get jobs in some kitchens, opening up more work opportunities."

Niel Kelley, a Douglas sophomore, recently earned his food handler card and got a job at Seven Feathers Casino Resort in Canyonville.

"Everybody has been so excited to share what they know," Casey says. "They're never too busy. It's been cool to see the community help this program out as much as it has."

Looking ahead, Casey hopes to create a food-for-athletes class and coordinate with the school's greenhouse and livestock projects to "go from farm to table right here on campus," he says.

Plans are also being discussed to take students to France and Italy in 2026.

"The culinary classes have been wildly popular," Kim says. "I think they've been fun, engaging classes for the students. It's giving them a really important skill base."