

SAVORING SUCCESS

Professional Culinary Institute chef Richard Battista is heating up the South Bay's culinary scene

Richard Battista, founder and president of the Professional Culinary Institute (PCI), spent his high school years peeling potatoes and working in the pantry at The Ritz-Carlton in Boston. An early mentor recognized his natural talent and suggested he travel to Europe to study, which resulted in a nine-year grand culinary tour of food meccas across the continent. "In hindsight," he considers, "if you had a million dollars in your hands, you couldn't buy that kind of education today."

This kind of hands-on learning marks a critical advantage PCI offers its 175 students. "I've never been happy with how culinary schools approach education," Battista admits. "Our classes are 90 percent hands on. Our students learn by watching and doing each technique, beginning to end." Students also benefit from a low 16 to 1 student-teacher ratio, which is half the ratio of most culinary schools.

In just two years, PCI has expanded its offerings to include culinary, baking and pastry, and wine programs that equal those of much older and well-known culinary institutes.

PCI is building a national reputation. How have you been able to do this so quickly? I think it comes down to the team I've assembled. When I decided to open the school, I called master chefs I have met over 30 years in the business. These highly skilled professionals sold their homes, packed up their families, and agreed to meet me here, in Campbell, to start this school.

We're also very aggressive when it comes to student competitions. Last year, our students won the state and regional American Culinary Federation's Hot Food Competition. They then went on to win the national prize, something extremely unusual for such a new school. From the very beginning, my goal was to develop a school that would be head and shoulders above the rest. There's just no market for mediocrity.

Why Campbell? Campbell is the perfect location. It's almost exactly halfway between San Francisco and Monterey, two important food

towns; close to the wine country; close to a major airport, highways, and public transportation. It was just an ideal location for our first school.

Does that mean more schools are planned? Yes, we're opening our Boston school in the spring of 2008. After that, I'm planning to open a school in Orlando, Florida, and then maybe one in Korea and São Paulo, Brazil.

Tell me about your typical student. About half of our students are 25- to 35-year-old career changers. They're nurses, doctors, or accountants who have a love of food, but, for whatever reason, didn't pursue this career earlier. Fed up with their daily grind, they're now ready to follow their passion. We also have a large percentage of students who are recent high school graduates.

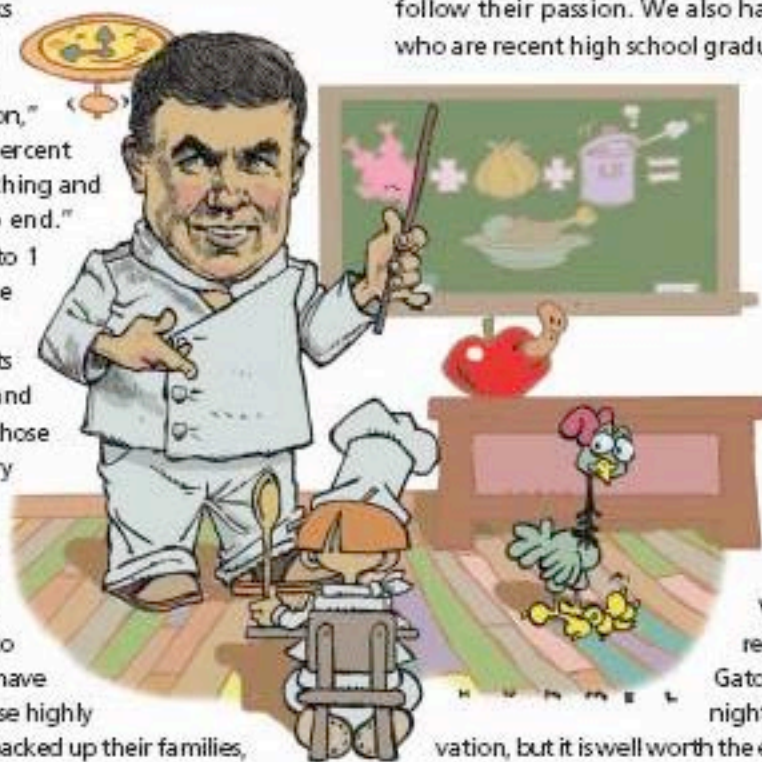
What are some highlights of your new hospitality program? The truth is, most hospitality managers out there have never set foot in the kitchen and don't understand the first thing about wine and beverage service. Our graduates will have a distinct advantage with a much broader range of experience and skills.

What do graduates go on to do after leaving PCI? Oh, they're all over. We've got graduates at the Four Seasons, Olio in Campbell, and The Fairmont.

What's your favorite South Bay restaurant? Dio Deka, in the Hotel Los Gatos, is just outstanding. I eat there three nights a week. It's difficult to get a reservation, but it is well worth the effort. Try their Nisiotiko, a dish of the Hawaiian fish Opakapaka (pink snapper). It's out of this world. I also like their lamb shank, but everything there is wonderful.

Can the home chef take classes? You bet. We offer a range of individual classes home chefs can take for a couple of hours; topics include Dim Sum, Simple Summer Desserts, and Basic Cooking Techniques.

Michele Bertolone



Visit the Professional Culinary Institute's website, www.pichef.com, for its upcoming class schedule.