

Athens' most exclusive restaurant is at a middle school - now closed for the season

By Lee Shearer

Posted Jul 23, 2015 at 10:22 PM

Athens' most exclusive restaurant isn't downtown or in Five Points, but at Clarke Middle School.

Every Thursday this summer, students prepared a meal for about 50 guests at the school, and they've had no trouble filling up a classroom that's been converted into a restaurant for the summer.

"We keep talking about advertising, but we keep selling out every week," said principal Tad MacMillan, who donned a kitchen apron to help out the Clarke Middle School Garden Kitchen Corps Thursday.

Forget about calling early to get reservations, by the way. With the beginning of school coming up Aug. 11, Thursday's was the last meal of the summer, with a menu that wouldn't be out of place at any of Athens' best restaurants.

Here's what a suggested donation of about \$10 got patrons Thursday:

- Deviled "little flock" eggs with schoolhouse pickles
- Zucchini and potato fritters with ricotta and chive oil
- Creamed corn (without cream) and bacon
- Shrimp salad with garden herbs and peaches
- Coconut rice pudding with blackberry jam

Pretty ambitious for about a dozen middle school students volunteering their time over the summer, but they bring it off week after week.

They've got some pretty good help, to be fair. Not MacMillan, but folks such as nationally known chefs Hugh Acheson and Peter Dale, who have supported from the beginning of the program, MacMillan said.

Helping Thursday were Sarah Lockman, pastry chef at The National, Diana Prescott, a line cook at 5&10 and University of Georgia student volunteer Hillary Jourdan.

Jourdan's has helped all summer, but it was the first time for Prescott and Lockman, who gave the children tips as they whipped up their gourmet meal just in time for their noon flood of visitors.

“I’ve been so impressed with the kids. They have taught me a lot,” Jourdan said. “They can take care of it by themselves at this point.”

“I love working with kids and I love cooking,” said Prescott. “It’s really cool. These kids know where their foods come from and they know how to do real cool things with it. They know much more than I did at their age.”

“I’m jealous I never had a classroom like this,” said Lockman as she watched Clarke Middle students Katie Upchurch and Ella Gibson slice bell peppers into thin strips.

The middle school students not only cook the food and prepare the plates, but set and serve the tables and even provide entertainment.

Rea’l Pogue sang before Thursday’s meal. “I’ve had a wonderful time,” Pogue said. “I honestly like cooking.”

“It’s a fun thing,” agreed Gibson, who announced the day’s menu after Thursday’s guests were seated. “I’ve learned a lot about making special kinds of dough, how to chop, how to sauté, lots of basic cooking things,” she said.

Most of the vegetables come from either the school’s garden or a student-run garden at the University of Georgia called the UGArden, Gibson explained.

Upchurch cooks at home sometimes, but that’s not anything like cooking for 50 people, she said.

“It’s a great experience to have,” she said.

The school’s agriculture teachers, UGA students, UGA horticulture professor David Berle, the Athens Land Trust and others have helped - mainly in establishing the school’s flourishing garden and keeping it growing. The restaurant idea grew out of the garden.

The big credit for the Clarke Middle restaurant goes to Vista volunteer Wick Prichard, MacMillan said. The restaurant was Prichard’s idea, and he made it happen, the principal said.

“He’s just done an amazing job,” MacMillan said.

Although Thursday’s meal was the end of the season for the Clarke Middle restaurant, it’s not the end forever. In fact, MacMillan is hoping the idea can spread to other Clarke County middle schools by next year.

“We want to make it so Wick is promoting this idea in all the middle schools,” he said.

Follow education reporter Lee Shearer at www.facebook.com/LeeShearerABH or <https://twitter.com/LeeShearer>.

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