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Food & Drink

Recipes for Success

From left: Garryelle Smooth, Chris Okorie and Glennisha Smith found passion and purpose at Café Reconcile.

In New Orleans, food is love, life and history. As the aspiring chefs and restaurateurs at this amazing school are learning, food can also be a future

BY MEGAN BRADEN-PERRY | PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIE DERMANSKY

Café Reconcile is a 130-seat restaurant that sits on a quiet block in Central City, a section of uptown New Orleans' Third Ward. Since 2000, people in the know have been dropping in to sample New Orleans classics like gumbo, jambalaya and the eatery's signature Bananas Foster Bread Pudding. But neighborhood folks know that Café Reconcile is much more than a place to get a good meal—it's also a haven for youngsters to get a first start or a second chance in life.

In addition to being a restaurant, the café is a nonprofit that trains at-risk youth ages 16 to 22 for careers in the culinary and hospitality industries. Since its founding, more than 1,000 graduates have fanned out among the restaurants and hotels that are the lifeblood of the city. The three-month training program is divided into three parts: life skills, restaurant work and an internship. And with no grades being given for the course, the graduation requirements seem to present little obstacle.

Students have to follow the program's Eight Habits of Success, a list that includes being on time, following directions, being positive, being efficient and doing their best work. But when you consider that many of the students are homeless, impoverished or single parents, something as simple as establishing good work habits can seem like scaling a mountain.

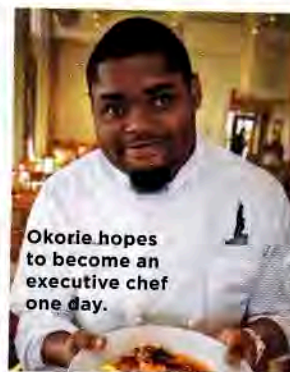
"When young people come to this program and they're able to get to work on time, follow instruc-

tions and have a good attitude, they'll pretty much be successful here," says Tyrone Keelen, the program manager. "We're going to equip them with all the tools necessary to get a job and to keep a job." These tools include not only how to work in front-of-house (waiting tables, serving as hosts and running food) and back-of-house positions (cooking, prepping and plating dishes), but also more practical considerations. During the program and a year after completion, students may receive everything from uniforms and bus tokens to haircuts, child care, assistance with bills, legal advice and crisis counseling. "Any barrier they might have to stop them from succeeding in the program, we try to take it away," Keelen says.

Toward the end of the course, students secure internships with partner restaurants that typically result in full-time jobs. And Café Reconcile grads can be found in some of the best-known eateries



Shrimp stock in the sauce gives fresh grouper a flavor boost.



and hotels in New Orleans, including Antoine's, August and Café Adelaide.

As Mardi Gras season kicks into high gear, let's take a moment to celebrate some of the students who have made Café Reconcile such a success, and a few of their favorite dishes.

CHRISTOPHER OKORIE

In 2009, after moving back to New Orleans from New Iberia, Louisiana, where he'd been since Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, Christopher Okorie was unemployed. He had worked at Walmart before but couldn't get a job at any of the local stores. He says he passed time with friends

doing nothing. Okorie recalls the chance encounter that reshaped his future:

"I was at my friend Milton's house and we were shooting dice and this homeless dude walked up to us. He basically told us, 'Y'all have been doing this every time I've seen y'all for the past week. Y'all need to do something with your lives.'"

The passerby also told them about Café Reconcile. Milton enrolled, but like many others, Okorie didn't apply until after he saw Milton graduate and find a career through an internship. "During that whole time I still wasn't doing anything," Okorie says. "After he graduated I thought, *I don't have anything to lose, because I have nothing going for myself right now.*"

Today Okorie is living the Café Reconcile dream, thanks largely to the support of his grandmother, Marilyn. After his internship at acclaimed local restaurant Café Adelaide, Okorie was awarded a scholarship to study at New York's International Culinary Center (ICC). But he almost declined the scholarship because he didn't want to leave his grandmother's side.

Okorie's mother had died after Katrina, and his grandmother was the only family he had left. Hiding her cancer diagnosis from her grandson, his grandmother urged him to take the opportunity. She died before he completed the program, but Okorie persevered and ended up being named one of ▶

ICC's Best Chefs Under 25, an honor that included a three-week fellowship in Italy to train with some of that country's top chefs.

Okorie, now 23, is employed at Borgne, a high-end seafood restaurant owned by famed chef John Besh, who, along with Emeril Lagasse, has been one of Café Reconcile's biggest supporters. Okorie says the program's life skills lessons are what he and other students benefit from the most. He remains open to the future. "I really want to say whatever God wants for me, that's how I'll do," Okorie says. "Ideally, I'd like to become an executive chef someday."

Okorie puts a New Orleans spin on the classic Italian cardinale sauce by substituting shrimp stock in place of lobster stock. "It's fish with Lyonnaise potatoes and onions, very popular at Galatoire's on Bourbon," Okorie says. "I use grouper because it's always in season."

Fish and Potatoes

Makes 4-6 servings.
Prep time: 90 minutes
Cooking time: 40 minutes

- 3 Idaho potatoes
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 yellow onion, thinly sliced
- Pinch sugar (if desired)
- ¼ cup white wine
- One bunch kale (substitute arugula or spinach if desired)
- 4 grouper or drum fillets
- Sauce (see below for recipe)
- 4 sprigs tarragon, leaves picked

Cut potatoes in thin half-moons, boil in salted water for about 4 minutes, and reserve. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in large

Dutch oven or skillet over medium heat. Add the onions and sugar, and cook until the onions are caramelized (a deep dark brown). Do not stir frequently. Add wine while scraping brown bits from bottom of pan. Once onions are soft, remove and set aside. In a separate pan, add remaining oil and let pan get hot. Add potatoes and sear on both sides. Add onions to potatoes, then add kale. In an oven-safe pan, sear fish on one side, flip over and then bake at 400°F for 6 minutes. Check fish for doneness.

SAUCE

- 4 tablespoons butter
- 1 tablespoon shallots
- 1 cup white wine
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 1 quart shrimp or seafood stock
- 1 quart heavy cream

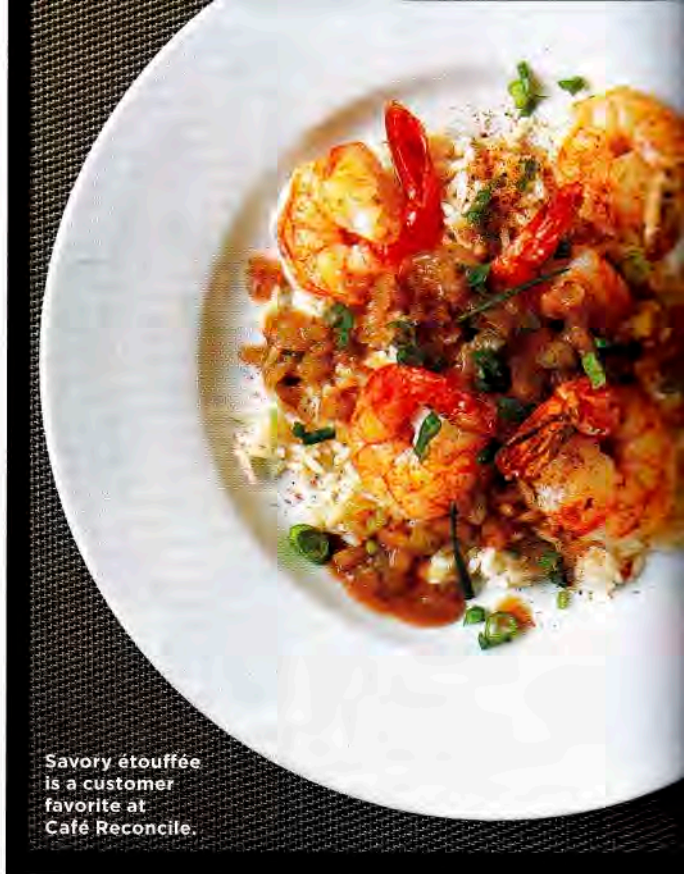
Melt butter over medium heat in a sauté pan or skillet. Add shallots and deglaze with wine; stir until wine is reduced. Add flour, tomato paste, paprika and shrimp or seafood stock, and stir. Finish with heavy cream and let simmer for 20 minutes until the sauce coats the back of a spoon.

Spoon sauce on plate. Add potatoes and onions. Lay fish on top. Garnish with tarragon.

Per serving: 974 calories, 33g carbohydrate, 283mg cholesterol, 77g fat, 33g protein, 388mg sodium.

GLENNISHA SMITH

Glennisha Smith, 20, is shy at first but opens up like bags of beads at Mardi Gras parades once she starts talking



Savory étouffée is a customer favorite at Café Reconcile.

about cooking and Café Reconcile. "My favorite moment here is every day, because of the people you're around. They just bring so much light into your life," she says.

Smith says her Café Reconcile training, which she completed in 2012, is superior to what her friends outside the program received in their food service jobs. "I feel like I learned way more here because I'm learning all the hands-on skills," Smith says. "When we go out for our internships, we already know what to do and how to do it, because we get a chance to work everywhere."

Smith's friends have taken note of her success at Café Reconcile. "One of them is about to go through the program," she says. "He sees me doing it and he's like, 'Man, that's a big career for your age. That's nice.'"

Shrimp Étouffée

Makes 8 servings.
Prep time: 1 hour
Cooking time: 15 minutes

- 2 medium onions, diced
- 3 stalks celery, diced
- 1 bell pepper, diced
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 2 pounds shrimp, peeled and deveined
- Creole seasoning, to taste
- 4 cups chicken stock or shrimp stock
- Roux (see below for recipe)
- Steamed white rice
- Chopped green onions

In a Dutch oven, sauté vegetables in oil until soft. Add shrimp and cook 5 minutes. Add Creole seasoning to taste. Add stock and bring to a boil. Whisk in roux and simmer for 5 minutes. Serve over rice. Top with onions.

ROUX

Combine 1 cup flour and ½ cup vegetable oil (or butter) in a heavy saucepan. Cook over low heat, stirring constantly, until flour is >

dark brown and roux smells nutty, about 25 minutes.

Per serving: 341 calories, 21g carbohydrate, 185mg cholesterol, 17g fat, 25g protein, 1,002mg sodium.

GARRYELLE SMOOTH

When Garryelle Smooth enrolled in Café Reconcile in 2012, she was a 20-year-old just hoping to find a career to support her ailing mother and her five siblings. Smooth fondly recalls cooking with her entire family, especially making stuffed bell peppers, before her mom got sick. "She used to have us in there peeling the shrimp, cutting the bell peppers in half, cleaning

the inside of the bell peppers and frying the ground meat," Smooth says. "She had six kids, so each one of us would do different stuff with her in the kitchen when she cooked, especially for Thanksgiving."

Prior to joining the program, Smooth tried nursing school but left because it wasn't a good fit and because she was unsure she'd find a nursing job. "When I came to Café Reconcile, it was like school again, but better, since they were giving us more opportunities and more experience with different things," she says. Although her mother passed away shortly before she completed the program, Smooth graduated and parlayed the experience

THIS MONTH'S POUR

Brandy Milk Punch

Classic New Orleans cuisine deserves to be coupled with an equally classic Big Easy cocktail. We passed on the usual-suspect Hurricane for a more refined drink that can be enjoyed cold or hot.



- Freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon sugar, plus more to taste
- 2 dashes vanilla extract
- 2 ounces brandy (or bourbon)
- 6 ounces whole milk
- Ice

Mix ingredients with ice in a cocktail shaker. Shake well to froth milk. Strain into rocks glass, over ice. Sprinkle with nutmeg. For warm version, pour all ingredients except milk and ice into a mug. Heat milk and add to mug. Sprinkle with nutmeg. —Sharon Boone



Not all gumbo is made with seafood. This hearty version is great for feeding a crowd.

into a job at Fresh Bar, a vegetarian and vegan-friendly custom salad and wrap restaurant on Magazine Street.

Chicken and Sausage Gumbo

Makes 8 servings.
Prep time: 2 hours
Cooking time: 1 hour, 25 minutes

- 1 chicken, cut up, skin removed
- 1 pound smoked sausage, 1/8-inch slices
- 2 ounces Italian seasoning
- 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
- 2 onions, diced
- 1 bunch green onions, chopped
- 2 stalks celery, diced
- 1 bell pepper, diced
- 2 tablespoons oil
- Roux (see previous page)
- 4 cups okra
- 1 16-ounce can tomatoes, diced

1/2 teaspoon Tabasco sauce
Steamed white rice

Sauté chicken, sausage, Italian seasoning, Worcestershire sauce, onions, celery and bell peppers in oil for about 3 to 4 minutes, and set aside. Slowly add roux and sauté 2 minutes. Add okra, tomatoes and Tabasco sauce. Transfer to a large pot. Add enough water to cover chicken, sausage and vegetables, and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer until flavors combine, about 1 hour. Serve over rice.

Per serving: 572 calories, 25g carbohydrate, 90mg cholesterol, 39g fat, 29g protein, 844mg sodium. □

To make a tax-deductible contribution to this program, go to cafereconcile.org/donate.



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