At the Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management, students peel shrimp, crunch numbers, and test-drive jobs.

By Pamela Denney | Photographs by Justin Fox Burks

Behind the swinging doors to the main kitchen of The Peabody, two dozen young people maneuver, chop, and taste. It’s only 9 a.m. on a Friday, but some of their crisp pinstripe aprons already look tired, a testimony to the work that started two hours earlier.

Spread along prep tables and surrounded by oversized pots, the students cook in small groups to prepare entrees and appetizers. Focused but cordial, they seem undaunted by the sheer scope of the place. Instead, they whisk together hollandaise or check flank steaks, marinating in a sauce made with chili peppers, tomatoes, and beer.

Twenty-three-year-old Erin Burke, a member of Team Salmon, one
of five student teams, concentrates on her Caprese Tower Salad dressed with basil, tomatoes, and mozzarella. Her teammate, Jose Carraz, prepares grilled salmon, drizzled with balsamic and served with jasmine rice.

Upstairs in The Peabody pastry kitchen, not far from trays of the hotel's desserts, Chef Alan Cochran and Lynn Drinkard handle a dish, a simple but elegant crepe filled with raspberry sauce and dark chocolate.

Back in the main kitchen, University of Memphis Professor Silke Silke is a circle of circe students like a proud but watchful mother. Periodically, she checks her clipboard and calls out practical advice. "Don't forget the time," she says promptly at 2:00. "You've got 15 minutes to plate." Like clockwork, team members garnish dishes, shoulder serving trays, and slip through the mezzanine to the Louis XVI Ballroom. Once inside, they arrange plates on a linen-covered table for the Peabody's four top chefs, who critique their food, presentation, and pricing. Unexpectedly, a spirited testimonial from the prayer breakfast next door flows through the wall, but the students are oblivious. They sit alert, hands folded, while Ana Gonzalez, chef of The Peabody's Capriccio Grill, drills down on pricing.

"Do you really think you can sell this salad for $5.00?" Gonzalez asks. "Remember that pricing has to include things like labor and electricity. It's not just the ingredients."

Welcome to Kitchen Stadium, academic style, where 25 students from the Kemmons Wilson School of Hospitality and Resort Management collaborate for a final exam that feels more like a competitive cooking show than a classroom for experiential learning. Their culminate for the exam is well-earned, following a full semester of Fridays spent

working in The Peabody kitchens to learn planning, pricing, cooking, timing, sanitation, teamwork, knife skills, and the aesthetics of plating food.

"They get real knives, and there are real consequences to the actions they take," Silke explains later over lunch at the University of Memphis Holiday Inn Hotel and Conference Center, where the school is located. "What's awesome about this course is that students aren't only exposed to a bakery or a kitchen or fine dining, but they are also exposed to the management styles of working professionals." Silke credits Doug Browne, the general manager of The Peabody, for facilitating relationships that benefit the students, the school, and the hotel. "He knows that the future of hospitality is having trained professionals who understand the real work that belies the whole orchestration of management. There's only one way to know what it feels like to peel 50 pounds of shrimp. You have to actually peel 50 pounds of shrimp."

Burke, one of her students, agrees. "You can't tell someone what to do if you don't know how to do it yourself," she says, explaining how the practical experience at The Peabody made course work work. "This class was so hands-on, and it didn't seem like we were students. Instead, the people at The Peabody treated us like we worked there."

Practical skills expected by community partnerships shape the core of the hospitality school made possible by an unprecedented $25 million gift in 1990 from the late Kemmons Wilson, the founder of Holiday Inn. Construction of a new Holiday Inn on Central Avenue followed, and the all-suite hotel opened to the public in the spring of 2009. The hospitality school's first 30 students started course work following the fall. Today, the school's endowment exceeds $4 million, and support from the Kemmons Wilson Family Foundation continues. Last summer, the foundation committed another $8 million to help develop new student and faculty programs necessary for the school's accreditation by the Accreditation Commission for Schools in Hospitality Administration, or ACPSHA. Several more gifts last year added additional support, including $200,000 from Hilton Worldwide and other founding franchises and $50,000 from the estate of D. Michael Meeks, the former president and CEO of Holiday Inn's hotel division.

Along with financial support, locally based corporations also support students with internships and applied learning. For instance, seniors enrolled in a strategic management capstone course signed non-disclosure statements last semester to work directly with the Hilton to test an upcoming program for its hotels nationwide. University students studying information management systems also were part of the strategy teams. "Our students ran through the same scenarios as the paid professionals to see if they could find any gaps in the corporate logic," Silke said. "We put them under the same kind of business stressors, and they came up with some real gems."

This spring, the school expands the relationship with an upper-level operations course at the Hilton Hotel on Ridge Lake Boulevard in East Memphis. Throughout the semester, students will rotate through every department, including the front desk, housekeeping, laundry, engineering, revenue management, marketing, and sales. "In the end, this industry is skills based," said Radesh Palakurthi, the school's director and chair of excellence. "If we can get our students broken into the industry before they start applying for jobs, then they will be good candidates."

At the helm of the school for the past 18 months, Palakurthi has shepherded impressive growth in student enrollment. He is particularly proud of the school's scholarship program, which last year awarded $500,000 to 60 applicants, and the growing number of students who are attracted to the hospitality major. "When I came in 2011, we had 126 students," Palakurthi says. "Now we have 80.

Palakurthi attributes the school's growth to both internal changes in the college's degree program and external industry trends. Until recently, students in the hospitality school graduated from the Fulmer College of Business & Economics with a Bachelor of Business Administration. "We had no enrollment to start and we needed some administrative help, so we were put under the stewardship of the business school,"
Palakurthi explains, "But over time, Fogelman's requirements, especially for advanced mathematics courses, hindered the school's ability to offer more specialized classes. "Our limits on credit hours were a huge handicap for our program, and mathematics was a hurdle for us," Palakurthi says.

So, starting in 2012, students could opt for a Bachelor of Arts degree, which requires the same core requirements as the university's School of Arts and Sciences and allows 60 credit hours for specialization in hospitality and resort management.

"With the B.A., the sequence of math is different, and the language requirement draws in people from other disciplines," Palakurthi says. "Now we are seeing students look at our program for a double major or to transfer in from community colleges."

In West Memphis, for instance, Mid-South Community College has developed a new hospitality program into a perfect two plus two, which is academic speak for courses that dovetail seamlessly with University of Memphis degrees. "Oftentimes, credits are difficult to transfer from community colleges that offer applied degrees, but Mid-South worked with us from the ground up," Palakurthi says.

Working closely with community colleges and adding additional concentrations such as food and beverage and event management will help Palakurthi and his six full-time faculty reach a significant goal: double enrollment to 400 students within the next five years.

"Our program has always leaned more toward hotel and resort management because of our Kemmons Wilson legacy," Palakurthi says. "But our students grew up watching Food Network, and many are interested in the culinary arts."

Industry demand also is driving course development. Certification is already available for students who complete a course in revenue management and analytics, a growing specialty in the hotel industry. Students also participate in revenue management internships at the headquarters for InterContinental Hotels (parent company of Holiday Inn), and some parlay the experiences into international jobs.

Palakurthi and his faculty embrace a global mindset and encourage students to think beyond the opportunities in their hometowns.

"We always tell our students if they are willing to travel anywhere in the world, they will move up very quickly," he says. "This is a global industry, so if students are willing to take a risk and leave Memphis, the industry will challenge them in many good ways."

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