



Profiles of Excellence

ALUMNI: DERRICK DAVENPORT

“Schoolcraft’s culinary program is truly one of the best in the country. I have worked with graduates from “Ivy League” culinary programs, and the skills I learned at Schoolcraft are on par or better than theirs.”

Joint Chiefs of Staff Executive Chef Derrick Davenport was pretty much born with a wooden spoon in his mouth. Born and raised in Detroit, he’s been cooking since he was a little boy. “Both my grandmothers were excellent bakers and cooks, and really inspired me.”

As a teenager, Davenport already knew he wanted to be a chef and where he wanted to go to gain the skills he needed. “I always wanted to go to Schoolcraft—it was my first choice,” he explains. “Schoolcraft had a significant number of Master Chefs, including chefs who had been at the Culinary Olympics. I knew Schoolcraft would give me the culinary foundation I needed to get my foot in the door at any restaurant.”

After completing high school, he immediately enrolled and earned his associates degree at Schoolcraft. “I really have a reverence for Schoolcraft’s chefs. They are at the top of their game—they demand excellence,” he exclaims. “With the skills they teach you, you have the foundation you need to succeed. But they also teach you that you have to earn your career.”

Davenport fondly remembers many Schoolcraft instructors, including Master Chef Kevin Gawronski, who helped him prepare for his chef exams. Another inspiration was Sylvia Hayes, who ran the professors’ pantry. “She encouraged my strong interest in baking and helped me earn money for tuition. But most importantly, she connected to me personally.” However, one instructor in particular would profoundly influence Davenport’s future. “When I was at Schoolcraft, Master Chef Jeff Gabriel would tell us wonderful stories about his life on a navy ship. He had amazing stories about the places he visited. I was really intrigued.”

After graduation, Davenport went on to work in fine dining establishments, and competed in culinary competitions, including winning a gold medal in the 1998 Michigan Restaurant Food Show and a Silver Medal in the Singapore Culinary Exposition 2000.

But something was still unfinished. When he was young, he had made a list of things he wanted to accomplish in life. He came across this list in 2000, and realized he had accomplished most of his goals except one: to join the military. Coming across the list and reflecting on Chef Gabriel’s stories was the final incentive he needed. On October 11, 2000, Davenport enlisted in the Navy.

After training, Davenport was stationed on a submarine, the USS Annapolis, and learned to work with limited space and products. He became known by his “Wicked Chicken,” a spicier chicken breast version of a buffalo wing.

He was then stationed in Afghanistan, where he set up the Afghan Army’s first bakeshop. In 2008, he transferred to his current position as Executive Chef for the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. “This position has a very high level of visibility,” he explains. “You serve dignitaries and heads of state. Expectations are very high, but I love getting to express my creativity.”

Among his other accomplishments, Davenport was team captain for the first Joint Staff Culinary Arts Team to compete at the Annual Army Culinary Arts Competition in Fort Lee. The team garnered 13 medals of which Davenport won two Gold Medals and one Bronze and took “Best of Show” in the Nutritional Mystery Basket Competition.

In March 2011, he lead the first ever Pentagon Culinary Arts Team. They won the coveted Installation of the Year in a fierce competition against 27 other military bases as well as an unprecedented 55 medals and five “best in shows.” His personal awards include the Joint Service Commendation Medal, Navy Commendation Medal, Army Commendation Medal, Navy and Marine Corp Achievement Medal (three awards), Good Conduct Medal and various service and campaign medals.

Davenport was the first Navy chef to compete at the IKA/World Culinary Olympics in Erfurt, Germany on the United States Army Culinary Arts Team in 2012. And this year, he won the 2013 Armed Forces Chef of the Year competition, cementing his reputation as one of the best cooks ever to come out of the Navy.

But he is far from done. “I would love to cook at the White House someday and compete in the Military Culinary Arts Competition.” He’d also like to teach cooking and maybe open his own restaurant, something with “Michigan meets French meets southern” fare.

And Schoolcraft is never far from his heart. “Schoolcraft gives you what you need to succeed in the real world,” he concludes. “I wouldn’t be where I am today if it wasn’t for the wonderful training and inspiration I received at Schoolcraft.” ●