



TAKING A BITE

OUT OF THE BIG APPLE



First stop, Baldor's, one of the largest importers and distributors of fresh produce and specialty foods in the Northeast.



BY KATHERINE NOLL

How do culinary students prepare for a road trip?

By baking their own scones, danishes and muffins, of course! November 12 got off to a delicious start as culinary students and faculty, along with a few special guests, boarded a bus headed to New York. As the pastries were distributed, the talk turned

to the day's itinerary: a tour of Baldor, one of the largest importers and distributors of fresh produce and specialty foods in the Northeast, followed by lunch at Iron Chef Morimoto's Chelsea restaurant, Morimoto, finishing up with a chance to explore the Chelsea District and the world famous Chelsea Market.

The special guests on board were the two people responsible for making the trip happen: Chris and Diane Martin.

"I like to cook," Chris, chairman and CEO of C.F. Martin & Co., said.

"And I hate to cook!" Diane, his wife and the chair of NCC's Foundation Board, added with a laugh. "Chris is a foodie."

As the bus pulled into Baldor in the Bronx, all the foodies on the bus, including NCC's president, Dr. Mark Erickson, were about to get a behind-the-scene look at what could be described as Willy Wonka's factory, if the fictional character swapped his confections for veggies.

Trucks pulled in and out of the massive receiving area as the group from NCC was escorted inside to get a real ear-opener before the tour.

Jim Chlebogiannis, director of sales, spoke about the relationship between chefs and those who provide them the ingredients to work their magic. He described in colorful detail the difficulties working with some of the most "innovative, passionate and narcissistic" people in the world. Students listened wide-eyed while culinary faculty smiled knowingly as he talked about some of the requests his company has received over the years.

One chef demanded that the dill he requested have exactly five sprigs on it, not one more or less. Another needed an out-of-season mushroom for a photo shoot the next day. Baldor flew the fungus overnight from Bulgaria to get it to the chef on time. Yet another mandated that all plum tomatoes had to have absolutely no white on the inside when they were cut.



NCC's Culinary Arts students, faculty and fans on a road trip to New York City

"Chefs have a difficult job," Chlebogiannis admitted. "But if you wind up in the culinary field sitting in a kitchen, I want to explain to you what it took getting that box of food to you."

Baldor offers same-day delivery in New York City. In order to unload on streets with limited parking, delivery trucks have to double park, resulting in half a million dollars a year in parking tickets. If a chef is unhappy that her asparagus are not all exactly the same size, the produce is sent back and a new delivery is made. Baldor receives over 3,000 phone orders a day. There is no way of predicting who is going to call and what they may order.

Chlebogiannis shared the moment that redefined his job for him: when the chef who requested the plum tomatoes with no trace of white inside invited him down to the restaurant for a taste test.

A bite of that delicious tomato, which had been quartered and slow-cooked with oil and spices, was "a life-changing experience. It changed my outlook on what we were doing here as a company. Now it's a pleasure to look for those tomatoes. Seeing what chefs do with the products we have, to supply them and be a part of that, is so rewarding."

After the industry insider talk, the group was given a tour through the massive warehouse, with workers buzzing everywhere. Forklifts zipped around pallets piled high with produce such as citrus, bell peppers and potatoes. As they walked through this labyrinth, the NCC delegation shivered because most of the cavernous rooms are kept quite cold. Even the empty cardboard boxes are refrigerated to ensure freshness during delivery.

"It's nice to see where some of our food comes from," student Kimberly Burke said as she peered at the mountains of produce. Baldor makes twice-weekly deliveries to Hampton Winds, the NCC restaurant where culinary students hone their craft. "We just use it in much smaller quantities."

The true Willy Wonka moment came when the group was escorted into the chocolate room, the heavenly aroma revealing the contents before everyone was through the door. The tour ended with a taste of Parisian chocolate.

The students were in awe over all they had seen. "The size!" "How quick they run around!" "All those sacks of potatoes!" "That chocolate room. I want to live there!"

As the bus made its way from Baldor to Morimoto, students eagerly took in the sights of the city. The excitement built as the bus pulled up in front of the restaurant, the door obscured by mysterious red curtains with Japanese characters.

Inside Morimoto, oohs and aahs erupted over the décor and the menu, but one of the biggest hits was the restrooms! The Japanese toilets controlled by an electronic remote sat in front of an infinity mirror, reflecting

cherry blossoms for as far as the eyes could see in each stall.

At the dining tables, students handled chopsticks like pros (as did the Martins and Dr. Erickson) as colorful sushi was served family style for the first course. The choices for lunch were braised black cod, crispy kombu-brined chicken and grilled Waygu beef, a difficult decision for budding chefs who wanted to try it all. "I'll take one of each!" one joked.

"I want this to take as long as possible," another student enthused. "This is a meal to savor."

Her friend laughed. "That's why I'm eating with chopsticks!"

The delicious meal inspired the future chefs to brainstorm for their final exam when students, working in teams, design their own menus. The finished meal is served to invited guests in the Hampton Winds restaurant, including the culinary faculty, who then score the meal.

Like a spark ignited by spices hitting taste buds, ideas bounced around the tables. "We need to switch it up!" "Let's get eel." "Turtle gumbo." "Alligator sushi!"

After the meal, students were given time to explore the Chelsea Market and the surrounding area, including the scenic High Line. A few did not want to leave Morimoto and expressed a desire to keep eating. "Let's get more sushi! How much money do you have?" Pockets were emptied and change was counted before the disappointed foodies were informed that the restaurant would be closed until dinnertime.

After sightseeing, a happy but tired group got on the bus headed back to Bethlehem.

"The generosity of the Martins is outstanding," Chef Susan Roth, culinary professor, said. "Nine out of 10 of these students would never have the opportunity to go to a restaurant like Morimoto. It's wonderful that they had the chance to go on a field trip like this."

For the culinary faculty and staff, who all work different shifts, being able to spend the day together is a rare luxury.

"It's a joy. We are very thankful to have this time together as co-workers," Chef Kelly Stem added.

Although it had been a long day, the culinary students and faculty had to be up early the next morning to prep for the lunch service in Hampton Winds.

"An experience like this is rejuvenating and a breath of fresh air," Roth said. "It lights a spark in you to do more and do better."

Want to taste the results? Call 610-861-4549 to make a reservation at Hampton Winds. Alligator sushi won't be on the menu, but a life-changing tomato or two might cross your plate. ♦