

HOW MUCH IS CULINARY SCHOOL WORTH?

By: Jenny Liu

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Five years ago, it would have been inconceivable for a person to pay thousands of dollars to enter a four-year institution for a blue collar job. With the economic down turn in 2008, many professionals are switching their career paths from lucrative white-collar positions in finance, business, engineering, and medicine, to enter the food and beverage industries. Schools like the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, the French Culinary Institute in New York City, and any of Le Cordon Bleu various global locations offer continuing education programs that are seeing unprecedented leaps in applications and enrollment.

Of the nearly one thousand culinary and hospitality schools in America, over a hundred are certified by the American Culinary Foundation. They all offer a variety of accreditations, but with all these different boards and crediting agents, it can be difficult to discern which agencies are more legitimate and recognized than others.

One of the most famous is the CIA. No, it is not the central intelligence agency. According to marketing brochures, The Culinary Institute of America considers its degree “a prized passport into the world of food professions.” Like admission to the typical academic institutions, the CIA requires an official transcript, letter of recommendations, a personal statement, and a \$50 application fee; but unlike the traditional application process, the CIA also requires students accepted to the degree programs to complete six months of practical experience in the kitchen before enrolling.

But it also carries the sticker shock of over \$100,000 for four years. A fresh graduate looking for employment will find that most kitchen jobs pay an hourly wage of \$10 to \$15. Not all people find this arrangement financially feasible or even appealing.

A major draw of the Culinary Institute of America is the alumni network. After all, a large part of success depends on whom you know and the people that they know. Some celebrity graduates of the CIA includes Anthony Bourdain in '78, host of No Reservations on the Travel Channel, Steve Ells in '90, who founded Chipotle Mexican Grill, and chefs pioneering the

molecular gastronomy movement like Grant Achatz from the class of '94. Not that a mere mortal would have unconditional access to these giants in the food industry, but it is comforting that perhaps graduating from a culinary school might eventually lead to those kinds of fame and riches, and the ability to debone a duck in less than five minutes.

Johnny Seguro, who is currently studying at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Los Angeles and working in the Food and Beverage department at the Hilton, says that the most beneficial aspect of culinary school is networking within the hospitality industry. "They have locations everywhere. It's only about \$40,000, and if it's something that interests you then go for it."

For those who do not have the time or money to spend, the French Culinary Institute in New York also offers a shorter and less expensive program.

French Culinary Institute grad Rochelle Bilow pens a blog about her experiences and writes, "It's absolutely true that one doesn't need a culinary degree to succeed as a cook, or even a chef. And a culinary degree is certainly not an adequate substitute for hours logged peeling potatoes and mumbling 'Yes, Chef' to a red-faced and screaming sous [chef]... I realize that there are about a billion adjectives one can use to describe a professional kitchen and none of them are 'nurturing,' but for a cook as green as me, a little coddling isn't such a bad way to start out."

For as many people who have gone to culinary school and gone on to make their mark in the culinary world, there are just as many who have never gone, but rather, taken the path of apprenticeship, popular before the advent of degree-granting culinary schools. World renowned chefs like Ferran Adria and Thomas Keller, with accolades, publications and awards lauding them as the best chefs in the world, and dozens of prestigious awards under their belts, have gone on to international superstardom and setting the standard for their industry without any formal training in an academic environment. Cooking is about passion and creativity. While there are those who need to be in a sterile bubble to transition into the heat of the kitchen, there are others, who work their way up from the bottom of the kitchen, shelling seafood, and julienning carrots; and without anyone telling them the "right way" to do it, they invent their own. A culinary school can impart knowledge, technique, and discipline, but a great chef is molded through experience and dedication.

David Turk, CEO of Indiana Market & Catering acknowledges that culinary school offer unquantifiable education and innumerable benefits to their students, but he also says, "Absolutely nothing can replace on-the-job experience – it doesn't matter if you know how to make the perfect crème Anglaise. If you don't know what a chafer is when we're all rushing around to do dinner serve-out and the chef needs a chafer – NOW."

What you get out of a culinary education depends on yourself, but most hospitality students and professionals will agree that getting a degree in the culinary arts will open more doors into the industry. Having a larger network always translates to better opportunities.