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## EATER AT LARGE

BY E.L. WYVES

# ESCOFFIER ON THE PECONIC



RIVERHEAD—Like any avid cook who has just remodeled his kitchen, Richard Freilich is feeling some sticker shock. But he has no regrets: “You only do it once.”

You see, the beneficiaries of his multiple stoves and deep fryers and wine chillers and wood-fired stone ovens and massive \$20,000 Sub-Zero fridges won't just be friends at a summer soiree in Sagaponack. Freilich is director of the new \$9 million, 30,000-square-foot culinary arts center at Suffolk Community College. When it opens in January, just in time for spring semester sautéing, aspiring Suffolk County chefs will no longer have to venture to Escoffier in Paris or even the French Culinary Institute in New York City.

In fact, enrollment in Freilich's program has tripled over the past five years, riding a crest of national interest in cooking magazines, cooking shows and the food business in general: in the last 10 years, the number of career cooking schools in the nation has doubled to 446, while the number of recreational cooking schools jumped threefold to 503, according to the National Restaurant Association. Such growth impressed Suffolk County, New York State, and several corporate sponsors enough that they helped build the bigger space in revitalizing downtown Riverhead.

And for those looking for a new lunchtime spot, the school's first floor space that fronts on East Main Street (just across from the defunct Swezey's department store) will host the Baker's Workshop Café and Bistro, a soup and sandwich shop with exposed ducts, lots of welded steel, and floor-to-ceiling windows, that is open to the public and will help students satisfy their 200 hours of internship by turning local produce and seafood into quiches, pies, and salads. “Although we do a lot of classroom learning, you have to actually do the work,” says Freilich, who honed his own chops as a partner in Beachtree Cafés (six locations in New York City and on Long Island) and Pasta Presto in Manhattan, and owner of Rick's Smokin' BBQ in Amityville. (He still runs a catering and food consulting business.) And because most of the students end up staying in the area, this could help

eliminate the perennial excuse of local restaurateurs that there's no good local help.

Walking through the restaurant, away from Main Street, a visitor would glimpse the bakery and pastry arts lab; the all-purpose cooking classroom that includes 16 two-student workstations with sink, charbroiler, gas-top range, salamander, deep fryer, and flattop grill; a 100-seat special function room; a

wok-station for Asian cuisine; and a 60-seat demo theatre equipped with TV-filming capabilities. “You name it, it's here,” says Freilich, arguing that the new space offers more than any other culinary school on Long Island. “We're teaching classic cooking techniques. Soups and sauces. Beef, fish, poultry. *Garde manger* [the art of preparing and presenting cold foods such as hors d'oeuvres]. Instructors make a béchamel; students make a béchamel.”

Continuing education classes will begin in spring and a young chefs program for teens and pre-teens will launch in summer. “We're going to be drawing such a wide variety of people,” Freilich says. “Housewives to sous-chefs. Young kids to retired people. Thai food to artisan bread.” A wine course is being developed with the Sommelier Society of New York, and Freilich hopes that students will consider getting two years of hands-on training with him, before pursuing a registered dietician or advanced degree at Stony Brook Southampton. (Simultaneously, the Stony Brook Southampton campus has been incorporating more local products into their cafeteria cuisine as part of its “sustainability” mission, and hopes to set up a composting program.)

“You can't go wrong,” says Freilich, distracted by the ocean of gleaming stainless steel all around him. “We're in an area that's growing. And we're like the pioneers or ambassadors for it.” □

*The Baker's Workshop Café and Bistro at 20 East Main Street, Riverhead, will open in the middle of January. Enrollment is now open for the 2008 academic year; contact Eastern Campus Admissions at 548-2512 for more information.*