Preserves Project Provides Sweet R&D for Hospitality Students

by Lisa E. Boyes

A bus trip to the Kawartha Ecological Growers farming co-op gave George Brown Chef Christine Walker the seed of an idea. Why not see if students in the Centre for Hospital and Culinary Arts could develop tasty preserves out of windfall and wild fruit from the non-profit co-op, helping to grow the local food business and her own students’ research experience?

The college’s Office of Applied Research and Innovation provided seed funding to support the preserves project.

Three different varieties of rhubarb and 15 bushels of apples later, in spring to fall of 2009, that idea became the students’ first batches of apple and rhubarb preserves, sold back to the co-op and CEO Mark Trealout at cost. “I sold the preserves through our weekly community drop-off program to families in the Greater Toronto Area,” says Trealout, “and turned up to 75 percent of sales revenue on these jars back to the growers on our co-op farms.”

Using flavour-preference data from focus groups of students in George Brown programs, several hospitality students concocted and tested pesticide-free, preservative-free jams made in the school’s lab, experimenting with sugar, acid and the addition of natural flavours. They came up with a plain rhubarb recipe, a vanilla, and an orange and vanilla; along with apple sauces and “apple pie in a jar,” a recipe with cinnamon, nutmeg and raisins that provides ready-made filling for pies. Meanwhile, students in the Centre for Business conducted price-breakdown and break-even analysis on the preserves project. Labelling of the preserves arose from a student-designed logo contest.
Walker brings quite a palate pedigree to George Brown, having worked as a chef everywhere from the Savoy hotel in London, U.K.; to the King Edward Hotel in Toronto; to a village grocers in Unionville, before coming to the college. Mark Trealout’s co-op is committed to supporting sustainable agriculture and food practices across more than 20 family farms in the western Kawartha Lakes.

In growing seasons to come, using baseline statistical analyses from last summer’s pilot preserves operation, Walker expects to expand her student R&D operation to include additional local farms and growers.