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Kitchen consequential

Victor Matthews swears his Paragon Culinary School offers a taste of reality

Matthew Schniper

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Military vet Bobby Couch says that Paragon's 'strong suit is that they actually prepare people to work on the line.'





Victor Matthews and co-judges evaluate for taste, appearance, creativity, use of ingredients and technique, and overall impact of a course.





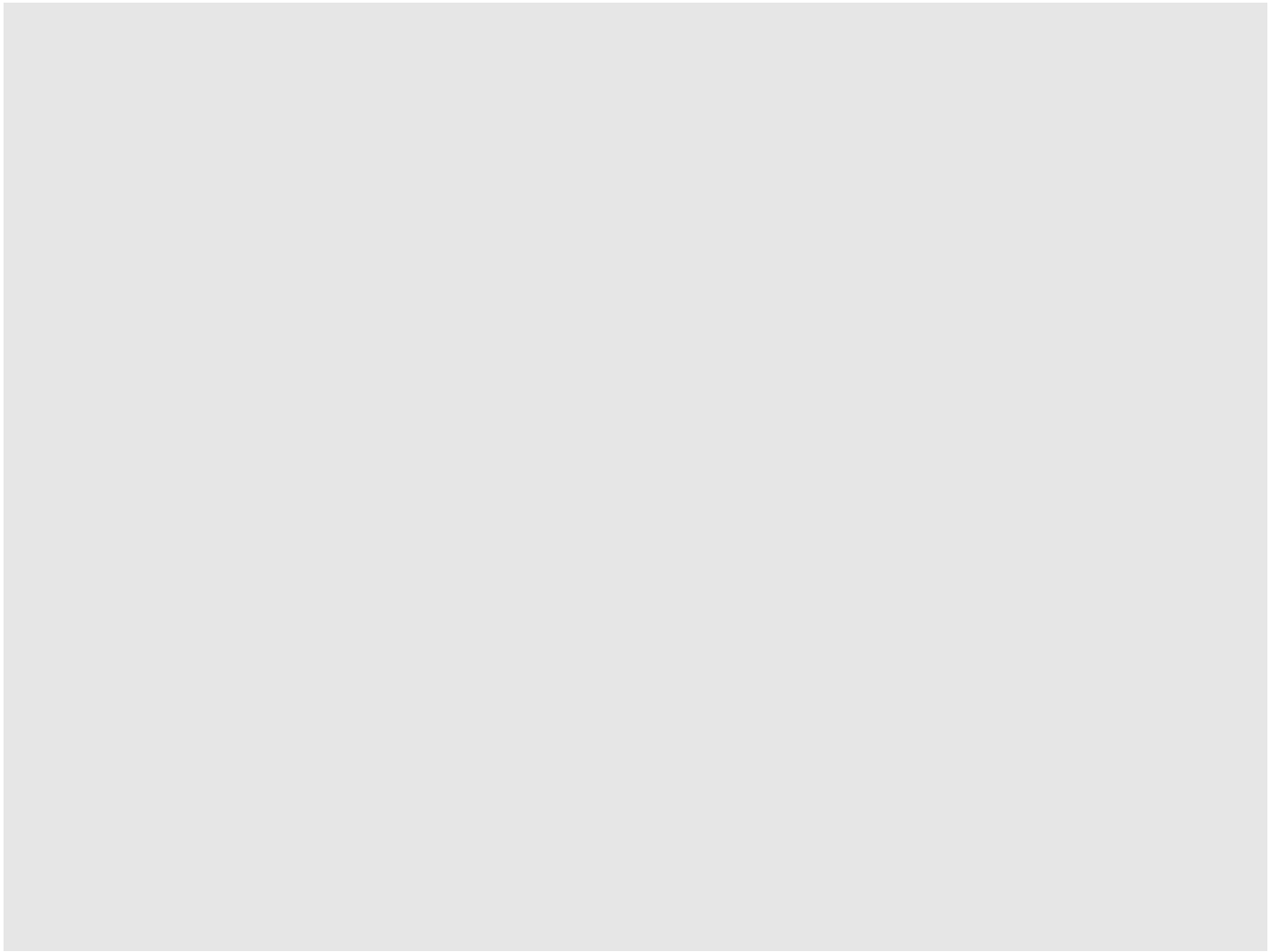
As tops of Paragon's 2009 class, Chifumi Wietgreffe (left) and Rhianna Matthews tested together on the last Extreme Practical day. Matthews reveals the trick to getting an avocado to sit straight up on a plate: Slice a strip off the bottom.

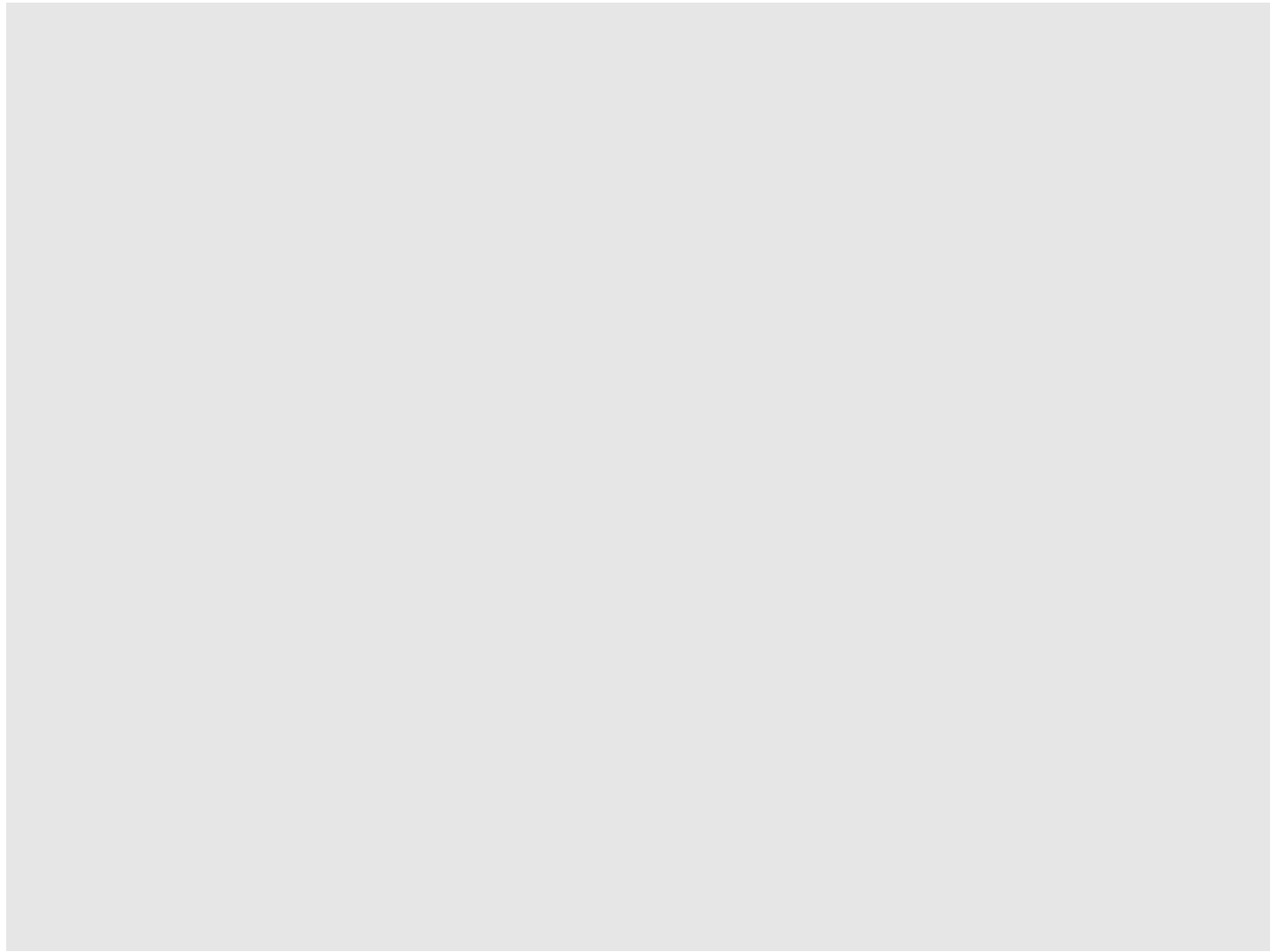




A dinner course by 22-year-olds Weston Foltz and Duane Webb: a bacon-wrapped pork tenderloin medallion on a Parmesan potato cake, topped in daikon slaw, next to a garnish of triple-berry adobo sauce and cilantro oil.

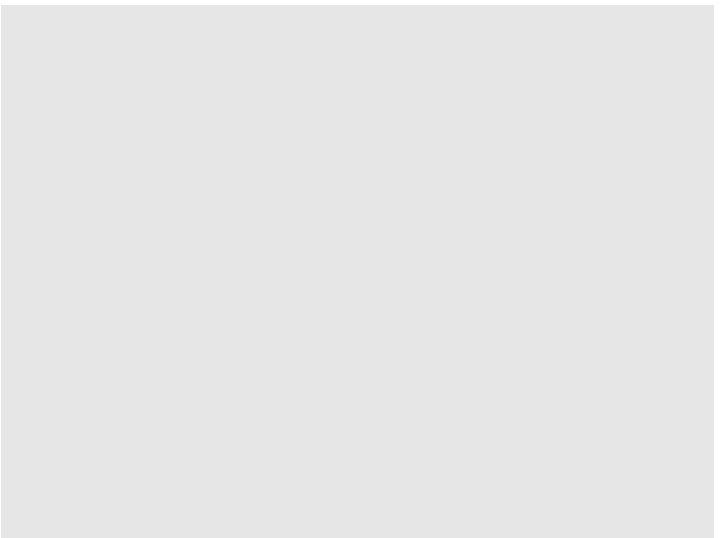






Bobby Couch has been prepping and cooking for almost 16 consecutive hours when his bubbling garlic and olive oil consommé sloshes up his left sleeve and pools inside his left shoe.

His scream and curses echo across the mostly empty royal ballroom at Paragon Culinary School, prompting a few of the faculty, acting as judges tonight, to rush into the kitchen. Someone had placed the wrong type of baking rack in the oven, and when Couch went to remove his tray, it slid entirely out instead of catching on a lip.



After a few minutes, school dean Victor Matthews returns to the bar with a nonchalant expression and announces that Couch probably has second-degree burns.

"I told him he could retake the test later," Matthews says. "He said, 'Fuck that, I'm finishing.'"

Delaying his second course briefly, Couch, 36, who spent 12 years between the Navy and Army, calls two of his roommates who are still active-duty combat lifesavers. Within minutes, a black Lincoln Navigator screeches to a halt outside, and the hulking guys jump out to spread on burn cream and wrap their buddy's wounds.

Tomorrow, the VA hospital will tell Couch that he may need a skin graft. But this June evening, Couch carries the adrenaline rush back into the kitchen, where he quickly assembles a short version of the spilled soup. (The irony of serving it inside a concassé tomato bowl — a cored tomato, boiled until its own skin slides off — didn't dawn on him until later.)

After four more hours and five more courses, plus sweeping, cleaning and dishwashing, Couch finishes his Extreme Practical. His high marks on this final exam, according to Matthews, prove his prowess not just in food creation and execution, but also budgeting, service, wine pairing and bartending, and his ability to think quickly when exhausted.

Though he's graduated only 17 students total in its first two classes, Matthews sounds as zealous as a Southern preacher when talking about Paragon Culinary School. You might describe him as a food fundamentalist who believes in trial by fire. From a converted Colorado Springs hotel, the polarizing figure aims to take on big schools, chain restaurants and an industry that he feels has grown stagnant in many ways.

As grandiose as his vision is the importance he assigns the 20-hour Extreme Practical.

"This test is the definition of why we're different," he says. "We need to see if they're ready. The only way is to put them through something like this. All these other culinary schools can claim as many hours of food contact as they want, but they can't say for sure when a person walks away that they can actually cook. I can guarantee you my students can hang."

Sauce soldiers



When Matthews says "hang," he's speaking specifically to restaurant work. And he means being able to endure, in long hours and over hot stoves, real-world kitchen scenarios: a dropped plate, a botched delivery of a key product, a fussy diner with a lengthy list of allergies and special requests, or that moment when the chef asks you to design tonight's special with a short list of ingredients.

Matthews opened Paragon, the Springs' only culinary program outside of Pikes Peak Community College, in a former Ramada Inn at Fillmore Avenue and I-25 five years ago. While another company leases the former guest rooms as apartments (for students and others), Paragon occupies office space and a single, spacious kitchen attached to two separate hardwood banquet rooms and Cedars Jazz Club. Classroom instruction takes place in a third ballroom outfitted with several dry-erase boards and lines of black metal chairs that face three large windows into the kitchen.

Matthews sees his school, which he and a few investors launched for about \$500,000, as not only more affordable than larger operations, but, simply, better — a "must, not an option."

"The idea was to establish a Culinary School that was small and elite and dealt with each student individually," reads a passage in his student handbook. "... We intend to train future masters, in the form of Culinary Jacks-of-all-Trades ... to lead the overall battle in support of independent restaurants, true chefs, and our veterans."

Matthews wants to keep the school small — no more than 200 students — but his definition of "elite" speaks more to graduation rates than admission numbers. Anyone hungry to learn can get into Paragon, but he says only the serious and disciplined will reach the Extreme Practical.

"I have a one-on-one hour-long sit down with every perspective student where I explain the state of the culinary world and the intensity of the battle at hand," he writes in an e-mail. "I pop all bubbles of happy-go-lucky BS, and I destroy all illusions of Emeril. When it is over, they either run, or they are ready to take the challenge."

If Matthews gives off a military vibe, it's not necessarily incidental. Of some 100 current students, Matthews counts 24 veterans. He says he's drawn to vets in part because his family includes some, but also because he's learned that a large number of those who leave the military aren't quite sure what they want to do career-wise.



And with the National Restaurant Association projecting that the restaurant industry — which it says comprises 9 percent of the country's total job base — will add 19,000 chef/head cook positions and 420,000 cook/food preparation positions by 2019, Matthews thinks that moving toward the kitchens makes sense.

Besides, if you're waging war on chains, mainstream schools and dull food, it helps to have those seasoned by the battlefield on your side.

Culinary fool?

What does attending a big culinary school buy you?

Not enough, in Matthews' opinion. Though he can't point to any firm, third-party statistics, he employs a convoluted and questionable math methodology to assert that a new student entering a culinary school this fall has about a 0.5 percent chance of becoming a chef.

"How is it possible," he asks, "to graduate roughly at least 100,000 people per year from culinary schools, yet have the same number of chefs on the Food Network and roughly the same number of fine dining places? Where are they? Where are all the chefs? Not in kitchens."

To clarify: Matthews is talking about his definition of a "true chef," someone who creates his or her own unique dishes in a fine dining setting. That, as opposed to a chain-restaurant kitchen manager or standard-issue private restaurateur who calls himself "chef."

Matthews believes most students want to become true chefs, to learn the skills necessary to one day run their own creative kitchens. So Paragon tries to cover it all, offering a single nine-trimester program with 11 subject diplomas, three yearly grand diplomas and a final Diploma de Cuisine. It's effectively a vocational school specializing in one vocation, with seven staffers besides Matthews and a 10-to-1 student-teacher ratio.

Largely because it eschews core curriculum, Paragon costs \$30,000 for three years, with payment plans available. By year's end, Matthews expects to earn accreditation from the Washington, D.C.-based Accrediting Council for Continuing Education & Training,  will open up financial aid and grants to his students as well.

Those resources are what allow many students to afford four years (\$105,000) at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America (CIA), or at the equally reputable Johnson & Wales University (\$93,000). They run 18-to-1 student-teacher ratios, offer full degrees overseen by more stringent accrediting agencies, and tout 98 percent placement for job-seeking graduates after six months.

And though Matthews estimates there could be as many as 850 culinary schools nationwide, including community college programs and the like, the big schools don't sound threatened.

"Not everybody is for Johnson & Wales," says Jorge de la Torre, dean of culinary education at Johnson & Wales' Denver office. "We're not a fit-all school. Some need [the Art Institute of Colorado], some need an apprentice program — it's what fits best for the individual. Great people have come from all the schools."

When asked about Paragon's Extreme Practical, de la Torre and several other culinary school liaisons matter-of-factly say they've never heard of anything like it.

DJ that dish

Matthews' own culinary path started at 15, when he began washing dishes in a North Carolina pizza place. He obtained an English degree from North Carolina State University in 1990 and left culinary studies at Wake Technical Community College in 1992 to pursue professional cooking.

By 1994, he was lead line cook under five-star master British chef Kevin Graham and in 1995 he cooked under master German chef Gunter Preuss at Broussard's Restaurant in New Orleans' French Quarter. He completed a classic European seven-year apprenticeship under master Italian chef Andrea Apuzzo in 1997. In 1998, he landed in Houston as lead line chef in the Omni Hotel's award-winning La Reserve, and in 1999, having never set foot in Colorado prior, he purchased the Black Bear Restaurant in Green Mountain Falls.

"I needed my own place," he says, adding, "I wanted weather, mountains, but otherwise was willing to go anywhere."



Now 41, Matthews owns a résumé listing dozens of honors including state championships and titles of U.S. Culinary Ambassador (he's thus far cooked in Argentina) and World Master Chef (meaning he belongs to an elite, England-based trade society of some 250 peer-selected chefs).

If he designed Paragon to challenge students, the numbers suggest he's succeeded. Of 33 original members of the 2009 class, only 18 continued into senior year. Three more dropped out along the way, and six were held over (at no additional cost) until fall. Which left the nine students of all backgrounds, ranging from 22 to 57 years old, to take their final in early June.

The format of the Extreme Practical is as follows: Two students (and one allowed "helper" who can do grunt work but not actually cook) arrive at Paragon at 4:30 a.m. to begin preparation for a banquet-style breakfast comprised of a couple hot items, breakfast drinks and any other dishes such as fresh fruit parfaits or pastries, to be served upon judges' arrival at 7:30.

After presenting their meals, each student draws a mystery ingredient (for instance, avocado or pork) and cooking style (smoked or grilled) and proceeds to a shopping destination(s) of their choosing en route to a 12:30 lunch for the judges at the Black Bear.

After preparing and presenting two courses each, the students drive back down the pass to Paragon to prep for a 7 p.m. cocktail presentation (one drink and appetizer each), followed by a 7:30 p.m., eight-course, wine-paired dinner (four plates each; bonuses such as a sorbet intermezzo optional). The final ends when the kitchen is clean. Students may not surpass a \$200 total food and wine budget, staple items such as butter or eggs not included.

The idea, if it isn't obvious, is to wow the judges with the most creative and/or well-executed dishes possible, ideally spanning several food genres and cultures and showing a mastery of learned techniques.

"I tell them to DJ their food," says instructor David Cottrill, a 15-year chef originally from Charleston, S.C., who's cooked everywhere from Terrazza at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas to MacKenzie's Chophouse locally.



He chooses the music term to best exemplify subtle touches like transitioning smoothly from light to heavy courses, just as a competent DJ segues seamlessly between down-tempo and faster-paced tracks.

With 3,200 points at stake on the day, the test comprises 40 percent of a student's final grade. A four-hour written final exam accounts for another 20 percent. So the senior slump isn't a Paragon option.

A day in the life

Paragon students test in order of class rank, meaning the first day's students tend to have it the roughest, says Matthews.

Up first on June 5, Tom Root, a 22-year-old Widefield resident who did a work/tuition exchange through the school (at the Black Bear and at Paragon banquets), and Courtney Schumann, a 23-year-old Springs native who designs wedding cakes full-time, muddle valiantly through.

Root serves a breakfast suffering most from cold scrambled eggs and overhears a few judges' remarks that leave him aware of needing to make up points at lunch and dinner. At both, he fails to DJ to Cottrill's standards, dishing too many items with German influence. Midway through dinner he looks spent, the day's sweat granting his stressed face an oily glow.

But he finishes strong with German potato dumplings, a curried potato potage (thick soup), spaetzle pomodoro and a tilapia filet with a unique and surprising cardamom watermelon sorbet.

Schumann starts with a flavorful Italian eggs Benedict and a delicious banana bread and holds momentum at lunch with a macerated raspberry-topped brie en crout followed by a Caprese salad with chilled grilled tomato slivers. The judges unanimously applaud her for the unexpected chilled twist on grilling — a creation forced by her pulling "grilling" as a cooking style. By dinner, she looks tired, but otherwise unfazed.

After a spanakopita starter, strawberry, feta and sun-dried tomato vinaigrette spring salad, spinach-and-goat-cheese-stuffed chicken with a bechamel sauce, and a tripe pesto polenta, she delivers a superb triple chocolate mousse torte that shows off her day-



job skills. Some undercooked rice aside, she fares all right. But having gone to bed the previous night at 11 and woken up at 3:45, this 20-hour test strains her smile.

It makes you wonder: Is this really like a day in the life?

Nick Lachman, the 24-year-old salutatorian from Paragon's first class, says it's similar, but not quite.

"Even on a double [shift], you have fresh minds around you — you aren't the only person you're depending on," he says. "Others can pick up your slack. But on test day, every hiccup tears you down a little more. You get tired and you have no fresh body to pick you back up. You have nobody. You have to do it yourself."

Lachman, who made sous chef at the Club at Flying Horse after six months on the line, remembers his extreme final to the detail. He tested with that year's valedictorian, Manuel Medina, whom Matthews appointed sous chef at the Black Bear.

"It's a beatdown, for sure," says Lachman. "It's a learning experience that you can't get anywhere else. It's one of those things I'll carry with me forever."

Lachman works with another 2008 grad on his line. He says they know people who went to other culinary schools, "and from what they say, it's just not the same. When they hear about the [Paragon] final, they're like, 'You're lying, right?'"

Matthews hopes those tales will help his students win a chef's attention. To that end, Matthews even includes a one-page recommendation letter with his graduation certificates explaining the test and, in typical style, noting that a Paragon graduate is to a regular culinary grad as a Navy SEAL is to a common infantryman.

To degree, or not to degree?

"I don't really look at the school they're coming from — I look at their attitude, the way they present themselves, the way they talk," says Bertrand Bouquin, executive chef at the Broadmoor's Penrose Room and Summit. "This has a lot more importance to me than a degree."



Bouquin says he sees graduates who're unable to cook "all the time, and not from any particular school.

"It's every school. I think a lot are being treated like a business. They graduate everybody because they pay \$40,000, \$50,000, \$60,000 for their school. There's some good and some bad ones, just like everything else.

"You can look at all the best chefs in this country or Europe — they haven't gone through big schools. ... They've done apprenticeships or things like that, and it's what they want to make out of this job."

Jeff Knight, executive chef at Manitou Springs' Craftwood Inn, doesn't hold a culinary degree as the be-all-end-all of ability either; he didn't go to a school himself. He does, however, keep a steady stock of culinary interns, and he's tried individuals out from across the board.

"More with the bigger schools," he says, "the downside is when these guys exit school, they're pretty confident they're gonna be able to come out into the real world and get a job starting at \$40,000 as the sous chef somewhere. The world just doesn't work like that, unfortunately."

Realistically, many graduates will make a little over half that working lower on the line.

Aside from some who "are very good and seem to know what they're doing," Knight says he's seen fairly incompetent hopefuls, including at least one from CIA: "The guy was a complete idiot. He couldn't cook his way out of a paper bag."

He uses the same term to describe a couple of Paragon students — not grads, it's worth noting — who have come his way the past few years.

"You can teach people all you want, and a lot of people can talk a really good game, but it's different when you actually pick up knives and start to cook," he says. "Some people can do it, and some people just can't."

One who lives up, at least to Knight's satisfaction, is Paragon's Couch, who's been at Craftwood a little over a year.



"He's worked his way through my entire kitchen and is now running my sauté station," he says. "He's pretty much reached the top without becoming a manager."

But that's Bobby, the student who not only worked through his severe burns (which didn't need that skin graft after all, though he's still in bandages three weeks later), but offered to be the one student who would weather the Extreme Practical alone. He also finished Paragon's three-year program in a year and a half by doubling up on classes three days a week on top of work.

Couch, who left Pikes Peak Community College's culinary program after a year, says he's a believer in Paragon.

"[You leave school] being able to do stuff without having to refer to a manual every time," he says. "It's not a screw-around school. It's there to be practically taught on how to cook and how to be on a line and know what you're doing and not freak out."

Cinnamon rolls and ice bowls

Of the 2009 graduates, nobody's had it as bad as Rhianna Matthews, Victor's wife of two years. The two met around the time that the school was launching, and she bought into minority ownership. Due to her role as recruiter and student coordinator outside the classroom, she spent four years working through classes.

Fighting the stigma that she might receive easy treatment, the 31-year-old tended to work extra hard through school. Come Extreme Practical time, she refused to talk to Victor about anything test-related, even at home.

Her partner, later named valedictorian, is Chifumi Wietgreffe, a 57-year-old former sushi chef whose English is second to her Japanese. She runs a hobby pottery studio out of her basement, from which she and Rhianna Matthews made delicate salt and pepper shakers, sugar caddies and sushi plates for the exam.

Wietgreffe attended Paragon so that when her husband retires in five years, they can open a bed-and-breakfast together. In the interim, she says, she wants to cook at a local fine dining restaurant. She'll also guest-teach a couple Paragon classes on Japanese cuisine.



After virtually flawless breakfasts of fresh-squeezed juices, giant cinnamon rolls and honey- and ginger-glazed fruits, among other delicacies, the two execute a similarly brilliant lunch only lacking in service points.

Determined not to lose any ground at anyone else's hand, they opt to send their helper home for dinner. What follows, start to finish, is a meal that could have hit Bouquin's five-diamond Penrose Room tables without causing an eye to bat. Think salted marrow served out of halved bones, a caviar-topped cold egg custard served out of its shell, tandoori soft shell crab over quinoa, a lotus root cake, edible flowers enveloped in gelatin and a fresh-squeezed grapefruit sorbet served in a hockey puck-sized ice bowl encasing lime and mint wedges.

"That's just retarded," Matthews blurts after returning from the kitchen with tiny corn-starch sheets that Weitgreffe had employed to mimic flowers atop her tuna sushi starter. Later in the meal, he licks and molds them like a child at play, clearly impressed by a foodstuff he's not yet explored.

None of the judges have seen an ice bowl in roughly a decade; Rhianna Matthews later explains that making one requires a six-step freezing process.

At the meal's end, she allows herself to slink down the ballroom's wall for a moment's rest before heading in to clean the kitchen. Though she'd later learn that she earned the highest grade on the exam, she wears a look of concern beyond exhaustion. And though all the students have expressed fatigue and relief at their day's end, she goes beyond.

"I'd rather pop out kids in a public port-o-potty," she says. "Childbirth was easier."

— matthew@csindy.com

