

A kitchen scene with stainless steel bowls, trays of food, and a coffee machine. The background shows shelves with red and green containers. The foreground features a person's hand near a bowl, a tray with a salad, and a coffee machine. The text is overlaid on a blue rounded rectangle.

EARN WHILE YOU LEARN

How becoming an apprentice—
or leading an apprenticeship
program—can help up-and-coming
chefs forge new paths toward
success // By Liz Barrett Foster

Apprentice programs are far more than knife skills and food safety requirements.

For many, apprenticing is a path toward bigger opportunities and higher-paying chef rankings. For a select few, apprenticing can provide a new start in life, filled with hope, confidence and purpose.

In 1999, **Chef Eric Brownlee** was just 13 years old when he began working as a dishwasher. He was a line cook by 15, and at 17, he entered an apprenticeship program in York, Pennsylvania. “I almost enrolled in a culinary school, but I ultimately enrolled in the ACF apprentice program,” he says. “I was a 17-year-old kid who couldn’t afford culinary school, and a local restaurant chef was affiliated with the local ACF chapter.” What was Chef Brownlee’s goal? To score a ticket out of Pennsylvania.

Chef Brownlee says that at 17, he probably would not have stayed in the kitchen if he wasn’t working toward certification. “I was the only cook in the program at the time,” he says. “Looking back, as an employee, I definitely think they spent more time with me because of the apprentice program, as opposed to if I was hired as a prep cook or dishwasher.” Chef Brownlee says the program helped him build the skills and experience he needed to enroll at Johnson & Wales University in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. He’s now the executive chef at The Katharine Brasserie & Bar inside the Kimpton Cardinal in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Chef Tom Edinger, CFC was interested in a move up the ladder and into management when in 2018 he heard about the WSU-ACFEF Apprenticeship Certification Program at the Carson College of Business/School of Hospitality Business Management at Washington State University. He had been working



Chef Jimmy Hill runs the Food Service Technology Program for the incarcerated at Lakeland Correctional Facility in Coldwater, Michigan.

at WSU as a university cook since 2016. Shortly after enrolling in the apprenticeship program, Chef Edinger landed a sous chef position on campus. At the start of the pandemic, he was moved into an interim executive chef position, and now, he’s in a permanent executive chef position at WSU Dining Services.

Chef Daqwan Sistrunk has always loved cooking and once worked at his family’s soul food restaurant in Detroit. His pursuits were abruptly halted in 2012 when Chef Sistrunk was arrested and later incarcerated at the Lakeland Correctional Facility in Coldwater, Michigan. Fortunately, the facility’s Food Service Technology Program, run by head chef and instructor **Jimmy Hill**, MDOC, was exactly what Chef Sistrunk



Left: Chef Jimmy Hill (center) works with Ernest Davis (left) and Daqwan Sistrunk (right), participants of the apprenticeship program at Lakeland Correctional Facility in Coldwater, Michigan; Right: ACF provides a range of culinary apprenticeship programs for aspiring chefs.



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– Chef Tom Edinger, CFC

needed to keep him looking forward and aiming toward a goal. By 2018, Chef Sistrunk was released. He is now the proud chef-owner of a family restaurant in Detroit called The GreenMile Grille.

Why Apprentice?

The learn-while-you-earn approach of an apprentice program is an ideal way for cash-strapped students to dip their toes into a new career pool. The opportunity to combine chef instruction with a paid kitchen staff position is priceless. Not only will you benefit from hands-on training in a commercial kitchen, but you’ll obtain specialized certification in the field of your choice, whether that means

fundamental cooking techniques, a sous chef position or a pastry chef certificate.

Many culinary schools offer apprenticeship programs. And for those who don’t attend culinary school after apprenticing, most one- to three-year apprentice programs will also provide credits that count toward higher



Chefs participating in apprenticeship programs learn skills ranging from cooking to food costing. Pictured: Chef Shawn Loving, CMC, CCA, AAC (left) and student chef Joshua Lindsay (right).

Can You Benefit from an Apprenticeship Program?

Wondering if apprenticeship is right for you? If you answer yes to any or all the following questions, you may be a good fit for an apprenticeship program:

- Do you want to move up in your culinary career?
- Do you want to learn new culinary skills?
- Do you want to learn while getting paid?
- Do you want to know how to network with chefs and culinary instructors?
- Do you want to earn certification?
- Do you want to develop a more professional work ethic?

education, helping you save on future tuition costs. Either way, an apprenticeship certificate and newfound skills can help set you up for a long-term career in foodservice. Later in your journey, you can apply for additional certifications, such as Executive Chef, Pastry Chef or Certified Master Chef.

Lessons for Every Skill Level

New cooks, and even restaurant operators, can benefit from an apprenticeship program, according to Chef Edinger.

“Fundamental cooking skills were included in my instruction, but for me, the biggest takeaways from the program were lessons in food costing, professionalism, communication and networking,” he says. “We had a couple of apprentices from a local restaurant, and the owner came to classes for the first year, too.”

Chef Sistrunk says that prior to entering Chef Hill’s program and becoming an apprentice, he didn’t realize how much more there was to cooking. “I didn’t really understand the flavor combinations, the seasonings or the sauces,” Chef Sistrunk says. “I didn’t understand the business side of it, either.” The program also taught Chef Sistrunk how important presentation is. “You see the food before you smell it or taste it,” he says. “The presentation is just as important as the meal itself.”

Chef Hill says that inmates go through a guidance center before being assigned to a facility. “They may ask, ‘What is it you’d like to do?’ Maybe you like welding, maybe auto mechanics,” he says. Those interested in food and the culinary arts are sent to one of the institution’s 10 culinary programs in various locations across the state.

Chef Brownlee says that going through an apprenticeship program can help a prospective chef understand what being a chef requires. “Being a chef is not all fun and fame and glory,” he says. “It can be tedious and monotonous, and it’s very hard work. I feel like a lot of students would not commit to enrolling in culinary school if they actually understood what it was like to work in a real kitchen.”

And it’s being in a real kitchen that makes apprenticeship programs stand out, Chef Brownlee says. “There are a lot of hours required to be certified in an apprenticeship program, and they grade you on various skills along the way. Apprenticeship programs immerse you in a real kitchen, as opposed to a culinary school, where you

American Culinary Federation (ACF) Apprenticeship Programs

Wondering what's involved in a culinary apprentice program and which one might be right for you and your career? Here's a brief explanation of the programs currently offered by ACF:

- **Fundamentals Cook Program** (1,000 hours)
The Fundamentals Cook Program provides introductory culinary skills and valuable industry exposure. When complete, you receive the Certified Fundamentals Cook (CFC®) certification.
- **Culinarian Program** (2,000 hours)
The Culinarian Program is a more all-inclusive apprentice program. A digital-hybrid approach allows you to track your progress online while gaining on-the-job experience. Upon completion, you receive the Certified Culinarian® (CC®) certification.
- **Sous Chef Program** (4,000 hours)
On-the-job training and classroom instruction will prepare you for a variety of industry careers. After completion, you will receive the Certified Sous Chef® (CSC®) certification.
- **Pastry Cook Program** (4,000 hours)
On-the-job training and classroom instruction will prepare you for a variety of pastry industry careers. After completing the Pastry Cook program, you will receive the Certified Working Pastry Chef® (CWPC®) certification.



Chef Eric Brownlee entered an apprentice program when he was just 17 years old, helping him build the skills he needed to move up in his career.

have a dozen guys working on one project, so apprenticing is definitely more valuable.”

Beyond being in the kitchen and learning kitchen skills, it's important to seek out a program that is run by an instructor who you can work with, who will push you and who can connect you with others.

Instructors Make the Difference

Chef Edinger says that the ability to network with other chefs and restaurants is very important in an apprentice program. “If I was looking for an apprenticeship program now, I'd look at who the head chef is and who he knows and who he can connect me with,” he says. “It's mostly about what you know, but it's also about who you know.”

Chef Hill works hard to encourage the inmates going through his program to strive for more. He brings in

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– Chef Eric Brownlee

successful local chefs to speak to the group, including **Chef James Rigato**, the award-winning chef-owner of Mabel Gray in Hazel Park, Michigan. “Chef Jimmy is doing the heavy



Chef George Skandalos shows students of the WSU ACEF Apprenticeship Program how to make pizza.

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– Chef James Rigato

lifting that society overlooks,” Chef Rigato says. “I’ve watched his work up close and can testify to the impact of his program. His teachings go far beyond the culinary world and reach his students on a soul level. The world needs more Jimmy Hills.”

Chef Sistrunk says that Chef Hill gave him the skills he needed to make sure he didn’t go back to his old way of life. “He gave me a skill that will never, ever stop being used,” Chef Sistrunk says. “If you take care of the food, then the food takes care of you. Everybody eats. Food is a necessity.”

More than food, Chef Sistrunk says that the apprentice program taught him how to work well with others and have a calm temperament. “Things can get heated in a kitchen, and there are a lot of different personalities,” he says. “You never know what someone else is going through, but Chef Hill’s program prepared me for that.”

Once students are enrolled in the culinary program at Lakeland, Chef Hill says he pushes those students to pass the nine- to 14-month curriculum with flying colors. “A passing grade on exams is 70%,” Chef Hill says. “I want them to get at least 85%, so they can have that extra boost of confidence.”

And Chef Hill's methods are working. He's been heading up the program at Lakeland for three decades and says that 90% of the students who enroll in the program complete it. "I know four or five guys that have gone on to do great things," he says. "Some have gone on to culinary school or catering, and one got on the water and is cooking on a ship somewhere."

Today, apprentice programs share equal footing with culinary school degrees, according to Chef Brownlee. "It's established that those who have gone through an apprentice program have done some of the hard work already," he says.

When you're ready, finding an apprentice program can be as easy as running a search online or finding a list of programs on ACFChefs.org.

Liz Barrett Foster is an award-winning writer specializing in restaurants, marketing and the economy. Learn more at www.lizbarrettfoster.com.

A Look at Two Apprenticeship Programs

The WSU Carson College of Business/School of Hospitality Business Management offers three ACFEF-approved programs, including a 1,000-hour Culinary Fundamentals Certification (CFC[®]), a 2,000-hour Certified Culinarian (CC[®]) and a 4,000-hour Certified Sous Chef (CSC[®]) program, as well as continuing education for individuals striving for other ACF certifications. The college uses a combination of mentorship from qualified professional chefs and face-to-face and distance learning classes. The program offers development and documentation of both culinary and work ethic skills for participants to achieve their desired certification level.

The Food Tech Program at Lakeland Correctional Facility offers a nine- to 14-month course that includes instruction in cooking fundamentals, short-order cooking, commercial cooking, catering skills, front-of-house service skills, life and professional development skills, and even farm-to-table prep and cooking skills, thanks to the facility's on-site garden. Program participants earn three certificates upon completion: ServSafe and ProStart[®] 1 and 2 offered by the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation (NRAEF) and the American Hotel & Lodging Institute's Skills, Tasks and Results Training (AHLEI START) certificate.

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