

I TAKE IT AS MY RESPONSIBILITY TO EACH STUDENT THAT OUR FACULTY IS ABLE TO MOTIVATE THEM AS MUCH AS HOLDING THEM ACCOUNTABLE.

A mantra the school teaches its students is, "Professionalism is your cornerstone." Like dropping a pebble in a pond and watching the ripples slowly cover the surface, Desens is casting his students – whom he has trained in the art of professionalism – into the culinary community around St. Louis and watching the effects.

"We require our students to wear their uniforms while working their externships," he says. "I had a student come to me and tell me, 'Chef, at first everyone in the kitchen just wore whatever. I wore my uniform, and the rest of the kitchen staff began wearing theirs, too'."

Desens doesn't want to speak too soon, but

he hopes this is the beginning of a trend of graduates from the Institute raising the bar for incoming kitchen employees around the region. Cary McDowell, corporate executive chef of Euclid Hospitality Group, which owns Pizzeria and Gringo in St. Louis, believes that Desens' graduates are doing just that.

"I had the pleasure of taking a cook from the first class at Hickey, and she is one of the best-prepared, young aspiring cooks from any program that I've ever dealt with, here or outside St. Louis," McDowell says. "I think it's a testament to [Desens'] commitment and standards. I can hit the ground running with one of his graduates."

"When there's a really good program and the graduates from that program get out in the work force, it's decidedly different. What's still in play in the industry is motivation for attraction, meaning young cooks are very attracted and motivated by the success of their peers. So, when Hickey students get out [of school], it sets a new standard that benefits everyone because it motivates the other guys and gals to up their game."

If all goes according to Desens' plan, the trickle of the Institute's students into the culinary world of St. Louis will continue to slowly elevate the industry as a whole. Desens will keep teaching his students that kitchens should run on mutual respect and accountability, and then send them out

**Go behind the scenes at the Culinary Institute of St. Louis at Hickey College with chef Chris Desens in the March episode of Feast TV.**

into the world, injecting the industry with quality cooks. He will continue on, one graduate at a time, watching for the ripples to reach the shore.

**Culinary Institute of St. Louis at Hickey College, 2700 N. Lindbergh Blvd., St. Louis, Missouri, 314.434.2212, ci-stl.com**

PICTURED BOTTOM LEFT: A student pipes a purée onto a baking sheet. PICTURED BOTTOM RIGHT: One of Desens' signature dishes: mushroom soup with peppered bacon, smoked gouda and thyme crostons.



## CULINARY SCHOOL CRIB SHEET WITH CHRIS DESENS

Much of the school's curriculum was written by taking fundamental techniques from the kitchen and applying them in another way to educate the next generation of cooks.

**MISE EN PLACE:** Roughly translated to "set in place" in French, mise en place is a kitchen term that means chefs should have all their equipment and ingredients set up before they begin cooking. Desens' team teaches students to have a mental mise en place, which means balancing knowledge with skill. The students are not only expected to know how to make stocks, sauces and soups, and butcher a fowl, but also how to compose an email, speak in public, plan a menu, complete purchasing for

said menu, do applied math and much more.

**GOOD INGREDIENTS COMING IN EQUAL HIGHER QUALITY GOING OUT:** Cooks know that the quality of their dishes depends on the quality of the ingredients used. Are the strawberries in season? Is the meat fresh and sourced from a healthy, humanely raised animal? The Institute applies this lesson to its students. "Not everyone who wants to get into our program," Desens says. "That means a better experience for all."

**CONTROL:** "Chef Bill Cardwell is a great chef; nothing moves without him knowing it," Desens says. Desens applies this experience and the knowledge he gained from it to the school's

program through his chef-instructors, who have all been successful executive chefs and are teaching because. "They're passionate, like me," he says. He trusts them and gives them control over their classes, letting them teach the concepts their own way.

**CONSISTENCY:** Chef Gordon Ramsay has said that ensuring quality and consistency in the kitchen is essential for a successful restaurant. Desens agrees, and he believes it's true in a culinary school, as well. Although his chef-instructors have control over how they teach, he decides what they'll teach. "My chef-instructors have ownership, and that's important, but I can tell you every day what's being made in each

kitchen," he says. "Every student gets the same curriculum. Students know what to expect. This transfers to motivation."

**LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES:** According to Julia Child, "The only real stumbling block is fear of failure," and she encouraged cooks to "try new recipes and learn from [their] mistakes." The staff at the Institute teaches their students to "fail quicker" and "fail better." "We understand failure leads to success," Desens explains. "It isn't enough to focus solely on success; they won't understand the value of what happens when they do fail – they'll become more familiar with themselves, the situation and the task at hand when they fail, and be better able to understand success."

# FEAST TV

Look for the *Feast TV* splat throughout the magazine. It tells you which articles are part of this month's episode!

At the Culinary Institute of St. Louis at Hickey College, founding program director Chris Desens applies a 360-degree approach to culinary education. Turn to p. 48 and watch the March episode of Feast TV to learn more.



This article and photographs appear courtesy of Feast Magazine and Jennifer Silverberg. Feast Magazine is dedicated to broadening the conversation about food and engaging a large, hungry audience of food enthusiasts. Jennifer Silverberg is a St. Louis based food photographer, to see more of her work, visit [jennifersilverberg.com](http://jennifersilverberg.com)

# toque of the town

THE CULINARY INSTITUTE OF ST. LOUIS AT HICKEY COLLEGE IS BRIGHTENING THE FUTURE FOR ITS STUDENTS AND THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

WRITTEN BY Shannon Cothran | PHOTOGRAPHY BY Jennifer Silverberg

"Hi, CHEF."  
 "GOOD MORNING, CHEF."  
 "HELLO, CHEF."

Chris Desens is walking among a sea of chef's whites down a brightly lit hallway at the Culinary Institute of St. Louis at Hickey College. Students are hurrying past him into large, utilitarian kitchens full of long, stainless steel tables covered with tubs of food. In one classroom, hunks of raw meat rest next to various knives laid out near cutting boards. In another, different types of flour wait for students to begin a lesson on pastry dough. Desens, the school's founding program director, is attempting to give me a tour of the school, but he's having a difficult time saying anything as every student who passes greets him, and he, in turn, acknowledges them. By name. Without glancing at their name tags.

When we finally sit down to talk about the school, Desens' eyes are shining as he gushes about how much he loves food, teaching his students about food and being out in the culinary community getting to know other chefs. The man is sincere—he really loves this school and every student in it. Hired five years ago by Hickey College's president, Christopher Gearin, Desens was able to be part of everything from the beginning—developing the curriculum, hiring instructors and watching the building being constructed one piece at a time. He has thrown himself into making this school the best it can be because, he says, he's a teacher at heart—he wants to share his passion with others. And his passion is food.

Desens is of average build with slightly graying brown hair and black glasses. He's one of those guys who would make a good spy because they just sort of blend into the walls—but in the hallways of the Institute, he is the sun and everyone else orbits around him.

"Anyone will tell you that the biggest motivating force in that school is chef Chris," says Domitrio Lewis, former student and current sous chef at PF. Chang's in Chesterfield, Missouri. "He has a way of bringing out the best in you with every word that comes out of his mouth."

Desens began teaching only after succeeding as a chef in professional kitchens. Before beginning his work at the Institute, he served as executive chef at The Country Club at the Legends, Cardwell's in Clayton and Racquet Club Ladue. Now he guides students through an 18-month program, at the end of which they earn a culinary arts specialized associate degree. The love he has for teaching and for the school's students goes both ways: The students who greet him in the hallways do so with sincere admiration.

"Chef Desens is the kindest, most caring, knowledgeable, motivating—this list could go on forever—just all-around awesome person I've encountered during my time here," says current



student Courtney Shepard.

Helping students reach their potential is what drives Desens. "Based on my management style, I believe every student that walks in is my responsibility," he says. "I hold our chef-instructors accountable to do their job and students accountable to do better each day. I ask them to self-assess, to ask themselves in the mirror every morning: 'What am I doing right? What can I do better?'"

As the first class was finishing the program at the Institute five years ago, Desens was asking himself what he could do better. "Toward the end of our program, many of the students still didn't know where they wanted to end up working," he explains. After all, there are many opportunities and specialties for graduates to pursue—they can work in hotels, hospitals, casinos, restaurants, bakeries, food trucks and even for corporations and in the corporate culinary sphere, so many weren't sure what would be the best fit for their individual interests and talents. "At first," Desens says, "I thought this meant we had failed them. But I learned it meant we needed to make a match."

At the time, the school's externship program involved Desens calling on his network of chefs and businesses in the region to place students in kitchens for two-month stints. In an effort to improve the matches, he increased his focus on the individual goals of each student through one-on-one conversations and making sure they were connected with the right post-grad opportunities.

"The externship gives students that transition from school to the work place," he says. "We find a good spot for the student and a good student for the chef." The externship not only helps students

discover the right culinary career for themselves, but also allows them to network and cinch a job when they graduate. "I teach my kids to build their networks so they can answer their own question of, 'Where do I want to take this degree?'"

Desens follows his own advice and is often out meeting with chefs and building his own network, which allows him to establish new externship outlets for his students and increase his own culinary knowledge. "Everyone I meet, there's something they can give me—[something] that I can learn from them," he says. "And that increases what I can pass on."

Desens teaches the first and final classes that students take at the Institute, and they are like the bookends of their education. The first class is called Tasting Success, and with it, Desens teaches students the techniques and principles that will make them successful in their careers: the importance of being on time, how to follow directions, how to clean, about safety, sanitation,

service and confidence. After they finish with the first class, they go on to learn more skills from other chef-instructors: computer applications, written expression, knife skills, supervisor training, food and beverage management, purchasing, dining room service, professional development, psychology, nutrition, math, public speaking and of course, fundamental cooking skills. For example, on day 16 of their training, students learn the elements of how to make salads: purchasing, storing and washing greens plus basic and emulsified vinaigrettes.

The last two months of the 18-month program are spent completing the externship, which is the other class Desens teaches and the other bookend of the students' education. "Our goal is to give [the industry] someone who can be a great employee—they can always enhance culinary skill level later," he says. "I want someone who can follow directions, who reports early, who can listen and be respectful, who asks questions and who can work clean and work hard."

Students are also given the opportunity to stage at local restaurants and to volunteer at events in St. Louis at outlets like the Saint Louis Science Center, Feast Your Eyes at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis and Feast in the Field, a chef-driven event at Claverch Farm in Eureka, Missouri. While volunteering, students help the events' chefs prepare and serve food to guests, allowing them to learn, show off what they know and network. And when the students work at events, Desens goes, too. "I teach every day, just not always in the classroom," he says. "I'm not just some guy holed up in an office. When I send them out [on a volunteer event], I'm there with them."

Desens' intense networking has paid off—there is a long list of culinary professionals in the region who not only know Desens, but also love his work. "He has the respect from a lot of chefs in St. Louis, which allows students to have endless opportunities," says Mark Silva, former student and sous chef at Algonquin Golf Club.

"Externships," Desens states, are not just for the students and the Institute, but "are three-way streets between the school, the student and the restaurant. I love sharing what I know with our students. I feel the same about feeding the culinary community at large with our graduates—we're giving them a higher-quality employee."

Area chefs agree. Ed Heath, co-owner and executive chef at Cleveland-Heath in Edwardsville, Illinois, says, "I talk to each of his students that come through Cleveland-Heath about chef Desens and his tutelage, and it's obvious to me that he instills a vivid level of expectation and work ethic for the students. We are two for two on externs being hired on after their program."

The learning doesn't end with externships, as Desens follows up with each extern site to further improve the program and thus the education of each student. "Every day I get more calls asking for our students," Desens says. "I want to know what these chefs need and want, what they like



PICTURED ABOVE: Chef Chris Desens in the kitchen at the Culinary Institute of St. Louis at Hickey College. PICTURED BOTTOM LEFT: Desens drops in on a class at the Institute during a lesson on how to make Scandinavian dishes like gravlax and lefse.



BASED ON MY MANAGEMENT STYLE,  
 I BELIEVE EVERY STUDENT THAT  
 WALKS IN IS MY RESPONSIBILITY.

about our students. That will help our students reach their potential, which is our goal. It's never just a grade, it's how what they do translates into reaching their potential."

For Desens, seeing students reach their potential means watching them share what they've learned at the Institute with others, and then find their place in the industry.

"I don't have a dream for bigger and better—I just want quality," he says. "I just want to be good at what I do. I want people to respect our program and our students."

Respect and recognition for Desens and his work most recently came from the Honorable Order of the Golden Tote, a prestigious national group of culinary educators, who nominated Desens to be a member this past winter. In June, he will be inducted into the group at a ceremony in Frankenmuth, Michigan.

"Our program is becoming more regionally known," Desens says. "Am I trying to put The Culinary Institute of America out of business? No—but I'd be happy if someone from Jefferson City chose to come here instead of going there because I believe in us."

As the program grows, Desens continues to develop mutual respect and accountability with students, as well as connect with them over a shared passion for cooking.

As a teenager, Desens was bitten with the food bug when he got his first job working in a restaurant in town. He was fascinated with the process of cooking in a professional kitchen and repeatedly begged the owner and head cook for more responsibility. Eventually, the owner agreed to let him be the "cook's helper," which led to him running the kitchen on his own for a short time.

"I was the introverted, fat kid," Desens says. "Food was safe for me. I could take a raw product and transform it, and give it to somebody and make them happy. That's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life."

Desens graduated from high school on a Friday, and two days later, his mother drove him to St. Louis, where he promptly enrolled in the hospitality management program at St. Louis Community College—Forest Park. Working in kitchens had taught Desens two significant lessons: The first was the value of the relationship between employees and management that took place in the kitchen and in the front of the house. Proper management, he learned, depended on the connections between the food purveyor, the hostess, the customers, the kitchen staff, the bussers, the bartenders and the valet—everyone involved in the restaurant experience.

"People who run a restaurant wear different hats but make it work together," he says. "And, to

succeed, everyone has to treat others the way they'd want to be treated. I knew I wanted to be a chef, but I hung my hat on the management aspect."

And that proved to be the second significant lesson Desens learned from working in kitchens. To be a good manager, he first had to learn how to be a good employee. "I still wanted to explore my relationship with food, of course," he says. But being a good manager was equally as important to his career. "I always say there are two things that'll fail you, and they are systems and people. But the trump card is the management of both."

Desens distinctly remembers his own road to culinary success, from a reserved teenager who lacked confidence to someone who, in his own words, grew to love himself enough to deftly manage a kitchen. He now teaches that almost unteachable trait—confidence—to the students who come to his school.

"Our instructors hold students accountable first, and I reinforce their actions," Desens explains. "It's a one-on-one accountability most times. We have an attendance policy. We treat this opportunity as a job and ask students to call if they will be tardy or absent. If they miss a certain percentage, they are warned, then placed into levels of attendance restriction, which may lead to dismissal, depending on the situation. If they don't call, I call them. If they miss more than one day, I call them to check up on them to see what is going on."

In addition to holding students accountable, the team of chef-instructors he's recruited are also fully invested in the education of each student. In order to teach courses at the Institute, chef-instructors must have a designation from the American Culinary Federation as a certified executive chef.

"Our instructors work with students on their progression through classes," Desens says. "If a student is performing below our standards, I meet individually with them halfway through the term. Each instructor develops a plan with the student for improvement and a way to reach their goal in that particular class. I support and follow up with each chef instructor and student to see that they are putting forth their best effort and holding firm to their plan. Finally, as I walk through the building each day, many times a day, I am constantly speaking to students and 'reaching' them in different ways."

"It took me a long time to get from a shy young kid to a person who believed in himself enough to confront someone, to say, 'This is not right; do it again.' Management let me go from being nonconfrontational to confrontational, which isn't your left-hand word. It's being honest with yourself, your staff and your guests. It's holding people accountable. Accountability got me where I am now, and it's what we're doing with our students."

However, Desens says accountability is only half the work for students; motivation is the other. "I take it as my responsibility to each student that our faculty is able to motivate them as much as holding them accountable," Desens says.

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