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ABBOTT HOUSE
CLAUDE B MEYERS
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IRVINGTON NY 10533-1246

THE RIVERTOWNS

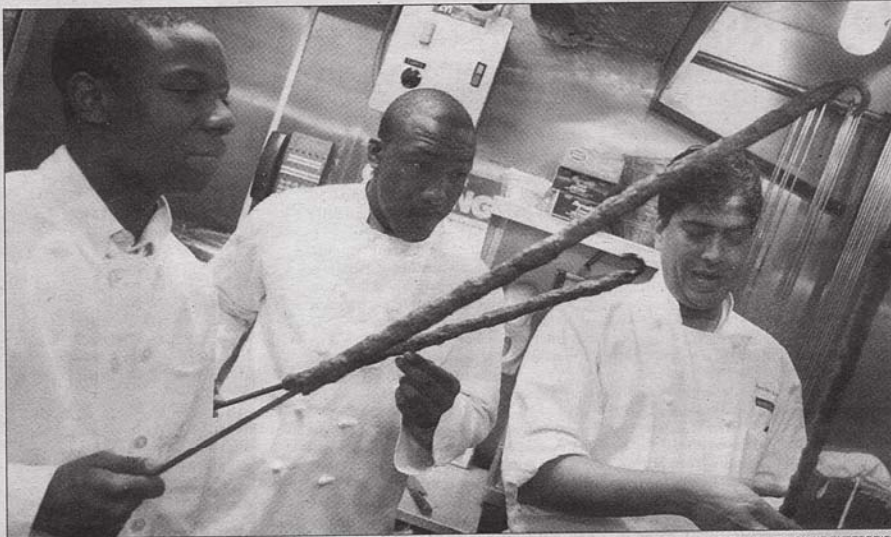
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THE BUZZ ON BUSINESS



JIM MACLEAN/RIVERTOWNS ENTERPRISE

Chef Navjot Arora instructs Abbott House residents Terry and Torren in preparation for the dinner on Monday.

Chef trains Abbott youth in culinary arts

By David Maggioletto

Four 18-year-old boys were recently mentored in the culinary arts by Navjot Arora, executive chef and owner of Chutney Masala, the Indian restaurant on the Irvington waterfront. The youths are under the care of Abbott House, a social services agency in Irvington that Arora contacted a few months ago with the idea of a cooking program.

For the last six weeks, Arora has met with the small group each Monday afternoon for a two-hour-long cooking class. "I wanted to provide them with a brief window into the world of being a chef," he said while sitting with the boys inside his restaurant on Monday.

Later that evening Chutney Masala and Abbott House hosted a gathering in the restaurant's upstairs level. The invitees were Abbott House employees and board members, as well as Business Council of Westchester affiliates who were on hand to honor the council's president, Dr. Marsha Gordon.

During a presentation at Monday's event, the four young men were given certificates of achievement while Gordon

was presented with a Vanguard Award. "[The award] is because of the work that she's done over the last 10 years being a supporter of ours and other local businesses," said Gregory T. Angelo, public relations coordinator for Abbott House.

Abbott House was founded in 1963 and is headquartered in Irvington. The agency provides group homes throughout

the region for young people, while also linking foster families with abandoned youths and providing housing and schooling to youths on their Irvington grounds. In 1992 the agency expanded to support developmentally disabled adults as well.

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Masala

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The collaboration between Abbott House and Chutney Masala began when Arora decided to use his business to support a local cause or charity. He approached Abbott House with the idea of hosting a fundraiser. While on the campus he passed a notice board advertising a creative writing program for Abbott House youth that is run by his friend, Irvington resident DeLauné Michel.

"I have a passion for sharing what I know with others, and I thought, 'Why don't I do something along those same lines?'" Arora said. A development associate for Abbott House located young people within the agency's care who showed an interest in the culinary arts. Two of these young men live in Abbott House group homes, while the other two have been placed with foster families.

Chutney Masala is an Indian bistro, but Arora's culinary training is broad. He graduated from the Institute of Hotel Management in New Delhi, which provides classical French culinary training to its students. Arora wanted his classes to impart some of these French techniques on the Abbott House youths. "I taught them the way I was taught," he explained.

The first day focused on kitchen cleanliness, hygiene, and organization. "The number one thing I learned was how to stay neat in the kitchen," one of the youths said on Monday evening. He then struggled to recall the phrase he learned for a chef's prepared station, and Arora provided the answer: "Mise en place," he said, explaining that this French phrase is loosely translated to "everything in its place" and refers to the orderly working environment a chef establishes before he or she begins to cook and maintains throughout the cooking process.

But before the mise en place can be achieved, other pre-cooking techniques must be employed. "We learned slicing and dicing," one of the youths said. He explained that Arora showed them how to protect the hand when using a knife, keeping the sharp edge below the knuckle at all times. "It was fascinating to show them how to slice an onion," Arora said.

From here they moved on to cooking. Arora explained to them that there are two basic cooking techniques: wet and dry. Wet cooking involves heating food using water, while dry cooking involves heat with another conductor, such as oil, directly on a hot surface.

Arora had them create two of the "mother sauces," béchamel and velouté. He explained that both sauces begin with a roux, which is a heated mixture of butter and flour. For béchamel, the cook adds milk; for velouté, the cook adds a stock, usually from chicken or fish. They also learned to make mayonnaise from scratch, and were given written information on everything they learned.

While the classes skewed toward French techniques, on the final day Arora made Indian chicken curry and naan bread. "It was a challenge to stick my hand in that oven," one of the youths said, referring to the 700-degree clay-pot oven used to produce naan. All of the young chefs said they took a turn making the bread, a process that involves covering the hand with a thick towel pad and using the pad to place the raw dough on the vertical side of the oven. The bread instantly bubbles and is fully cooked in about 45 seconds, at which time a long hook and spatula are used to remove it from the wall.

At Monday's event the boys practiced front-of-the-house restaurant work as well. Two of the youths poured wine, beer, and soda behind the bar, the first such bartending experience for both. The other young men passed hot hors d'oeuvres, which included curried tilapia, lamb

kabobs, and chicken biryani.

The experience working with Arora at Chutney Masala gave the young men a glimpse into the restaurant industry. All expressed some interest in the culinary arts as a possible career path. "The program wasn't that long, but we learned so much," one of them said. Added another, "I wish it could have gone on for a whole year."