

Chefs of *IslandWood*

Environmental Education With
Thoroughly Civilized Cuisine

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Hand them lemons and the chefs of IslandWood will make more than just lemonade; they'll turn them into an epicurean banquet with a presentation to rival the most fashionable five-star resort. Whatever comes their way — from fresh local seafood and produce to prickly pear and nettles — the kitchen staff of this acclaimed “school in the woods” will transform it into gourmet dining. If it's true that the cook is key to any organization, then the kitchen is the pride of IslandWood.



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“There’s a lot of inspiration here,” says lead chef Jim White. “When we’re offered something unfamiliar, we study how it’s used in the culture it comes from and compare it to other foods. It helps us keep the menu creative as well as enjoyable.”

At IslandWood, the cuisine is more than world-class; it’s part of the curriculum. Set on 255 acres at the south end of Bainbridge Island, IslandWood is hailed as the nation’s most ambitious environmental learning center. The campus is the site of numerous classes, camps, conferences, and community events. At the heart of it all is the School Overnight Program, which provides a hands-on outdoor education for fourth-, fifth- and sixth-grade students from economically challenged communities across the Puget Sound region. For inner-city children who may have spent little time outside their own neighborhoods, four days of living and learning in the forests and wetlands of IslandWood is an ecological adventure.

Kitchen Curriculum

It may be a gastronomic adventure as well. In many IslandWood programs, the kitchen serves as an entrée to concepts of sustainability and healthful choice. Classes can also have a distinctly Northwest flavor. For example, “Cooking for the Season” introduces unusual dishes of native edibles including fiddlehead fern and nettles. Another popular offering, “Sustainable Cuisine,” incorporates bread baking and other kitchen-based teambuilding into leadership retreats.

“Our adult programs can be demonstration or hands-on,” explains Eric Wilborn, facilitator of retreats and conferences at ►



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IslandWood. “We offer many different activities such as preserving food, fermentation and preparing hors d’oeuvres. The kitchen is an important part of the program. And we get raves on the food.”

Bread is included in youth programs as well, but it starts at the very beginning with the children threshing and grinding the wheat into flour. Students also pickle green beans, create pasta from scratch, and twirl their own pizza dough. Camaraderie is one of many lessons learned in this kitchen classroom.

“There’s a spirit of community that comes with growing and preparing food,” White says. “It harkens back to when people gathered together to shell peas and talk.”

Dirt to Dinner

For a dozen fourth and fifth grade students who participate in IslandWood’s Dirt to Dinner summer camp, the roots of sustainability run all the way back to the vegetable patch. Dirt to Dinner introduces children to the entire food cycle, from growing and cooking to eating and composting. The IslandWood garden and greenhouse are outdoor classrooms where students get their hands dirty to learn that food comes from the ground, not a plastic container at the supermarket.

When it comes to gardening, the lessons are never static. Garden educator Scott Brinton constantly updates the activities as crops come and go.

“It’s always changing,” he says. “We build lessons around whatever’s in season.”

The garden holds many opportunities

to educate, Brinton notes.

“We grow things the kids have eaten all their lives, but may not realize where they come from. We choose varieties that do well in containers and small spaces so they can grow them at home. Our goal is for the kids to think about what they put in their bodies; there are no vending machines at IslandWood.”

Whether the budding gardeners are hand-pollinating cantaloupe or drying herbs, their garden projects often become kitchen subjects. The resourceful kitchen crew has several tricks up their sleeves, including “french-frying” parsnips and carrots, and turning leeks into “onion” rings. Another kid favorite, IslandWood ranch dressing, is bursting with herbs freshly harvested by the students. The educators have learned something too: Children feel invested when they grow and harvest the food they

eat and may be more willing to expand their palates.

“You’d be surprised what kids will eat when they’ve picked it themselves,” Brinton says. “One time we picked kale and used it in a stir fry with lots of other vegetables. The kale was everyone’s favorite. It’s obviously about more than the food; it’s a connection.”

To keep things interesting — and keep the chefs on their toes — Brinton interplants the usual beans and potatoes with surprises such as cardoon, prickly pear, Japanese mountain yams and Andean tubers called yacon, with a flavor reminiscent of apple and watermelon.

World-Class Cuisine

As the head chef of IslandWood for the past two years, Jim White faces unique challenges. In addition to his role as a member of the school’s education team, he must satisfy the executive tastes of





conference clients while meeting the needs of hundreds of students who camp at the facilities year-round. If that weren't enough, White and his staff prepare everything from baked goods to condiments fresh on site.

The cuisine of IslandWood is primarily organic and features locally grown produce and sustainably raised meats and seafood. Consequently, the season dictates the menu.

“We buy everything possible from local farmers,” White says. “When we prepare it, we try to show reverence and do justice to the work that went into producing the food. Now, more than ever, people want to know where their food comes from. We're at the tip of a groundswell. It's a good time to be a chef; it's a good time to be a chef here.” ♦

