

# *In the Kitchen*

USF Sarasota-Manatee's new program focuses on bettering the community. Faculty members believe the school's Culinary Innovation Lab will transform the area's hospitality industry.

When he visited some of the more than 200 hospitality schools in the country, in-person or virtually through their websites, Cihan Cobanoglu knew he wanted his college to stand out.

Although the dean of the College of Hospitality and Technology Leadership at the University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee has been working toward getting his school ranked in the top 10 hospitality schools nationwide, he wants to differentiate his school in another way.

Cobanoglu believes the college's Culinary Innovation Lab accomplishes that goal, by bringing students out of the classroom and into a kitchen in their community.

After opening its doors Jan. 7, the culinary lab — the kitchen-turned-classroom on Lakewood Ranch's Main Street that brings the "back of the house" cooking experience to the forefront for hospitality students — serves as a space that hones creative and competitive students who actively seek ways to engage their community in their class work.

For cooking novices who want to learn their way around a grill, cooking demonstrations remain a fixture on the



USF Sarasota-Manatee instructor **Garry Colpitts** demonstrates a cooking technique.

sidewalk in front of the culinary lab during First Friday celebrations.

Starting this summer, the culinary lab will also feature cooking classes for the public.

While no specifics on class schedules and how much the classes will cost have been released, yet Cobanoglu promises "reasonably priced courses," and says he can't wait to get the community in the kitchen.

The space is also symbolic.

To Cobanoglu, the culinary lab represents the direction Manatee and Sarasota counties' hospitality and tourism industries are heading. It also gives the public an opportunity to visit, and learn, what students do during their hands-on class time.

"We want to prove to the community that we're serious," says Joe Askren, USF professor at the Culinary Innovation



**Lauren Walker** dices an onion during class.

Lab. "We aren't just sitting in here dreaming of something to happen. We're making things happen."

The key to Cobanoglu's plan to double the education hub as an anchor for improving area hospitality and tourism, is found on a white board propped on an easel at the entrance of the lab, which consists of a bar and kitchen, a formal dining area and a dishwashing station.

Cobanoglu, and USF professors and chefs Askren and Garry Colpitts, who each teach classes in the culinary lab weekly, swear by Food Powers Community — a plan designed by Nan Summers, USF's continuing education specialist.

Cobanoglu, Askren, USF Sarasota-Manatee Regional Chancellor Dr. Arthur Gilford and other school professionals, officially launched Food Powers Community in February.

A multi-colored chart illustrates the idea of collaboration across hospitality-related platforms, "from farmer to buyer," Askren says.

By combining resources and sharing information, Cobanoglu believes Manatee County and its surrounding areas will become a more desirable place to visit or live.

Monthly, open-to-the-public meetings now fill the culinary lab, which serves as a venue for representatives from restaurants, hotels, nonprofit organizations and other groups to share ideas and offer services to each other. One way of sharing is through the website [foodpowerscommunity.com](http://foodpowerscommunity.com), which seeks to connect people through food in Sarasota and Manatee counties.

Students will also participate in the collaborative efforts in upcoming semesters, by working with other groups, such as Jewish Family & Children's Services of the Suncoast Inc.

The organization will pair the school's hospitality students with homeless veterans in a student-becomes-the-teacher setting.

Students will completely run the program to teach veterans how to cook, while specifics still need to be worked out.

With bigger plans in mind for the school and lab and how both will impact the community, the dean's "we can do anything" mentality has become contagious to Askren and other school faculty members.

"The more you work with him (Cobanoglu), the more you kind of turn in to him," Askren says. "He has such a passion for what we're doing."

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