

Scene Last Night: Red Hook Farmers, Edelson, Gottesman, Neumark

Oct. 16 (*Bloomberg*) -- Some people know what to do with leafy vegetables. Others learn the hard way.

Ariel Morales is one of the ones who knows. The other day in the kitchen of the Williamsburg Community Center, Morales stood over the sink washing a big bowl of chard. He'd grown and harvested the sturdy greens himself at a farm in Red Hook -- part of his job with Green City Force, an environment-themed AmeriCorps program.

Wearing an apron, his hair tied back, Morales smiled as he picked up each leaf with its red rib and wrinkly surface, and ran it under the water on both sides. He got so into the task that by the time he was done, a piece of chard was snagged in his eyeglass frames.

That's when John Unwin, chief executive of the Cosmopolitan Las Vegas, a sleek hotel on the Strip offering Blue Ribbon, Milos and even a secret pizza place, walked up to the sink. The veteran of the hotel business, including almost 10 years with Ian Schrager, had come to Williamsburg to lend his expertise to Morales and others enrolled in a Sylvia Center cooking class.

Sylvia Center, founded by catering empress Liz Neumark, teaches kids, teens and young adults how to prepare and cook healthy foods, mostly in lower-income neighborhoods. Unwin, through his friendship with Neumark (they worked together

when he ran the Hudson Hotel) has become a supporter. But more than writing checks, he said, he likes to participate.

Soapy Salad

Good thing the chard had already been taken care of: working at a Mr. Steak when he was college, Unwin blew his chance to move up from dishwashing after he was asked to wash two crates of lettuce. "I ran some hot water, I put some soap in the sink and I dumped the lettuce in," Unwin recalled last night at Sylvia Center's gala at Sotheby's on the Upper East Side.



Instead of food prep, there was only a lot of healthy eating to do in an atmosphere that felt "much more like a dinner party at home than a gala," said Cindy Edelson, who worked at Bear Stearns "three children ago" and serves on Sylvia Center's board.

To guests including Cindy's husband, David Edelson of Loews Corp., Robert Gottesman of First Manhattan Co., Beth Jacobs of Excellentia Global Partners and David Wachter of W Capital Partners, waiters served beet (not beef) burgers with sprouts on a mini Kaiser bun. Teens studying with Sylvia Center served beef tartare tartines and empanadas filled with apples and cheddar.

Pickled Okra

The dinner recipes were inspired by Sylvia Center students. Chard came alongside monkfish, and

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pickled okra was a side; both dishes had been developed in the Green City Force class Unwin attended in Williamsburg.

After Unwin escaped having to wash lettuce, the students were divided into teams for a cooking contest. The goal: to make a main dish and a side in the time span of the class -- about an hour -- and serve it to the instructor, who would judge. The winners would get a set of kitchen utensils to use at home.

Unwin had been skeptical of the pickled okra. How could you pickle anything in an hour? he asked the team planning to make it. They explained that while they might not wind up with an actual pickle, they would be able to get the okra to take the flavor of the brine.

Kale Convert

From there, Unwin did a little chopping and consulting on spices. Mostly, he stood in the kitchen marveling at how the students worked. He saw a woman who said she'd never made an omelette go ahead and make one -- and it turned out perfectly. He noticed the students' confidence, their problem-solving and their negotiation skills as they vied for ingredients and space on the stove and counters. He himself uses cooking as a way to build leadership and teamwork at the Cosmopolitan: last year he took chefs from the hotel's restaurants to a Sylvia Center outpost in upstate New York, Katchkie Farm, where they harvested produce and cooked with students.

At the gala, any guest could see how the Sylvia Center experience benefits the students: it was evident in their poise, savvy about food and commitment to eating healthily.

Kenneth Sookoo, a high school junior, said he's lost 24 pounds in the five months since he enrolled in a Sylvia Center class held on the Lower East Side. "I personally didn't know how to cook before the class," Sookoo said. "I am now making healthier

choices. I was never really sure about kale. I love it now. One of my favorite dishes is butternut squash lasagna."

Unwin, as honoree, received denim overalls embroidered with the words "Farmer John." He said he especially likes to grow his own tomatoes, though Neumark said she also regularly sends him tomatoes from Katchkie Farm (he got a basket of those too).

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