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Education

Testing the boundaries of taste

College's test kitchen partners with national grocer to try out products for the chain's private label

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Creating a taste bud-tantalizing mini-tart and a punchy pumpkin pie may not seem like a perfect opportunity to push the applied research envelope.

But for culinary arts students at Toronto's George Brown College, working with food scientists and top chefs to create, develop and evaluate recipes in a unique partnership with grocery chain Sobeys Inc. is serious business.

And this is just one of the dozens of ventures in a variety of fields teaming colleges and polytechnics with industries across Canada. Such research collaborations are meant to enhance students' learning experiences, while helping businesses boost their bottom line.

George Brown, which has a renown culinary management school, now has the Compliments Culinary Centre, where a good chunk of the research for Stellarton, N.S.-based Sobeys Compliments private-label products is conducted.



From left, Elyse Schopp, chef James Smith, food scientist Winnie Chiu and second-year culinary student Heather Israel get a taste of the icing just made at George Brown College's Compliments's Culinary Centre for food research. *(Tim Fraser for The Globe and Mail)*

For George Brown students like Heather Israel, in her second year in the baking and pastry arts program, and Elyse Schopp, who earned a culinary management diploma last spring, nothing said "your input counts" more than being asked to cut their creative teeth on a Compliments private-label test project.

When the culinary centre's chef James Smith, a George Brown alumnus, was recruiting students last year to help test pie prototypes for Sobeys, Ms. Israel stepped forward.

"I looked at it as a learning experience, seeing how you go about putting something together in a test kitchen," says Ms. Israel. Now 35, she left her job in an automotive factory in Arthur, Ont., north of Guelph, to pursue her childhood love of baking, and hopes to work on a cruise ship after graduating this school year.

She says her time in the test kitchen working on developing a pumpkin pie for Sobeys gave her a taste of what it would be like to work in the food industry.

During an afternoon of experimenting with various ingredients — with the goal of creating a crust with a unique texture, a pumpkin filling that had pizzazz and finally a tasty, price-wise end product — Ms. Israel crafted a pie with a standard flour-and-shortening crust, but that was made more crumbly with ground almonds. The crust was lined with marzipan before it was stuffed with an amaretto-laced, swirl-look filling.

"It really gave us insight into how to substitute ingredients," Ms. Israel recalls about her testing experience. "We got to taste [the pies] ourselves, and toss ideas back and forth about what would work, and what Sobeys might change to make it cost effective."

For Ms. Schopp, who now works part time in the college's culinary centre with Mr. Smith, her applied research work was an equally appetizing eye-opener. Last year, one of her first test projects involved fine-tuning a mini-tart stuffed with a roasted red pepper and feta dip — keeping in mind cost, time and taste.

"The development of a recipe isn't just about writing it up and making it; from beginning to end, there's so much more to it," says Ms. Schopp, who studied sociology at York University in Toronto for three years before following her heart and taking the culinary arts management diploma program.

These days, Ms. Schopp has been helping in the various areas of the Compliments Culinary Centre, including in the front kitchen, which hosts demonstrations and food-tasting sessions for the paying public, and the test kitchen in the back of the centre, where much of the recipe development and testing is done.

She's also working on the spring issue of the Sobeys recipe-filled in-store magazine Inspired.

Scott Cooper, a Sobeys Inc. vice-president of marketing and location planning, says the national grocery retailer and food distributor is working to create relationships with colleges across Canada.

"It's an opportunity to give us access to the brightest and best minds in the culinary arts and tap into new and fresh ideas as students go through [the research]."

"The culinary colleges are on the edge of food trends," adds Cooper. "They [students and chefs] help us with product development, concepts, product assessment ... and it's a nice opportunity to contribute and give back in helping upcoming Canadian food talent."

Mr. Cooper wouldn't divulge details about the funding George Brown receives from Sobeys, but, he adds, "it is a significant investment for us. And it's a long-term commitment we've made."

The federal government is also investing in these kinds of partnerships.

The College and Community Innovation Program, administered by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, supports research collaborations between companies and colleges, notes the Department of Finance Canada's website. The department says the program has helped fund, for instance, a joint project between Red River College in Winnipeg and a leading motor-coach manufacturer to integrate a modified heavy-duty diesel engine into an existing vehicle to meet reduced emission requirements.

In his March federal budget, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced \$48-million in funding over five years to support more college-industry partnerships.

According to the Association of Canadian Community Colleges, Canada needs such alliances.

In a 48-page report released in May, 2006, the Ottawa-based association said Canada is performing well globally in terms of basic research (such as in number of publications produced), but the development of applied research — creating and testing new products, processes and services that are innovative and made available for use by consumers — "has not been well addressed."

However, says the report, colleges, which "are closely connected to local communities and can respond quickly to the changing knowledge and skills needs," are moving toward feeding that applied-research need. The association estimates the schools spend between \$100-million and \$200-million annually in applied research.

"Applied research is about solving problems and generating ideas for immediate and real-world applications, whether for the marketplace, or teaching and learning," says Robert Luke, director of George Brown's Office of Applied Research and Innovation that was established last year.

He says his office distributed \$130,000 in seed funding for this fiscal year for faculty-applied research projects.

Students and staff are doing hands-on research with a variety of partners, including with Magna International and the University of Windsor (for a booster-seat educational program for school-age children), Bloorview Kids Rehab in Toronto (to design a special handwriting data acquisition device) and Princess Margaret Hospital in Toronto (to develop a transition employment project that helps cancer survivors return to work following treatment).

But the George Brown-Sobeys partnership is perhaps the *pièce de résistance* of the school's foray into applied research.

Winnie Chiu, a food scientist and managing director of the college's culinary studio, said the alliance took root 2-1/2 years ago. Today, panels of 50 to 60 students take part in multi-sensory evaluations of new products before they're launched in the grocery stores, providing both educational benefits to students and relevant data to Sobeys, she says.

"We recruit chef faculty, students and staff from the college to evaluate the products that Sobeys is about to launch," says Ms. Chiu, adding that generally, five to 10 products are evaluated twice a month.

"We then gather the data, write a report and give it to the Compliments brand team to tweak."

Mr. Smith, who as chef works closely with students in the culinary studio's open kitchen, has a wealth of experience in the food industry. After leaving Australia for Canada in 1989, and becoming an honours and award-winning George Brown grad four years later, he worked in a prestigious test kitchen, on a popular cooking show, and at upscale Toronto restaurants including Truffles, Boba and Scaramouche before carving his niche in the Compliments Culinary Centre.

But he says sometimes all the cooking experience in the world can't beat the fresh food ideas of many students.

"People in this industry who've been around a long time might think, 'That's been done before,' but a younger person might say, 'Even if that's been done before, do it again.'"

While Sobeys is a key benefactor of a bulk of the research coming out of George Brown's culinary studio, the college is working with other food-industry partners, including the Canadian organic candy maker Pure Fun, a project being boosted by \$7,500 in funding from the college's Office of Applied Research and Innovation.

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