

**Food For Body and Soul  
Oakland, California**

On March 12 my husband and I paid for our dinner at a remarkable place where the dinners are usually free. Every day the St. Vincent de Paul Dining Room serves an average of approximately 1,000 hot meals to people who would otherwise go hungry. That evening its large, sparkling white space was transformed for the celebration of two ongoing accomplishments: 70 years of St. Vincent de Paul's devoted service in Alameda County and the beginning of their Kitchen of Champions job training program. The tables were set with the royal blue and white of St. Vincent de Paul and decked with yellow rose petals and votive candles. Quietly, without extensive publicity or social flourishes, a profoundly affirmative statement was being made by an extended community that cares deeply about our East Bay cities and is determined to address their problems.

The hero of the evening was Matt Colgan, executive chef at A Cote on College Avenue, Oakland, the first in a series of outstanding guest chefs who will be preparing benefit dinners for the Kitchen of Champions project. Thanks to his generosity, that of the restaurant's owners and staff, and the generosity of the vendors with whom they work, every cent of the ticket revenue went to the program. The prawns wrapped in pancetta were a gift. The perfectly seared chicken breasts were a gift, as were the handsome, carefully trimmed asparagus spears and the heavenly lemon almond pound cake that would support a cascade of whipping cream and sliced strawberries. Everything was a gift of our local, thriving food community to help the neediest, struggling to put their lives together, on the bottom rungs of the culinary ladder.

Matt was assisted in the preparation of his superb, four-course meal by St. Vincent de Paul's chef, Michael Stamm, and a team from among the Kitchen of Champions' first graduates. The wait staff was a cheerful and very efficient group of student volunteers from St. Mary's College. Members of the St. Vincent de Paul community welcomed the guests, escorting us from the parking lot to the dining room, introducing us to others, seating us at our tables. In a neighborhood usually

associated with bleaker stories, the intersection of San Pablo Avenue and 23rd Street, the message was one of generosity, civility and warmth. At the beginning of the evening, many of us were strangers. By the end, we felt like friends.

The goal of the Kitchen of Champions program, launched in the fall of 2007, is to give its participants a solid foundation for a career in food service. They acquire skills together with a sense of direction and self worth that will open doors to urgently needed employment. Several graduates of the first class are, for example, continuing their training with culinary courses at Laney College while others are working for Paula Le Duc Catering. If the green garlic and spring onion soup or the delicious ricotta gnocchi are fair illustrations, with guidance, confidence and effort they can meet the highest standards. Would that the Kitchen of Champions project could be an inspiration to the whole community as it grapples with other challenges in the cities of the East Bay.