

# Family F.Y.I.

## Brunch and Auction to Benefit Dropout Program

**G**raduation day is a time of happiness and pride for graduates, parents, friends, siblings and acquaintances. It's a terrific time for everyone – except for those who don't graduate.

The El Cajon Project is holding a party for 15 young people who did graduate this year, but might not have without the help of this unusual skill-building program. The El Cajon Project is an alternative to the traditional, classroom-based, high-school approach. It provides rigorous, hands-on training in the culinary arts at some of the Bay Area's top restaurants.

On June 5 this year's class will be celebrated at Spago Palo Alto. There will be a champagne brunch and silent auction to raise funds for the program. Co-director Betty Ewing says she hopes to raise \$5,000 from the event, which will be used to fund the organization's operating expenses.

The El Cajon Project was started in 1993 when Ewing, then chef-owner of the Blue Sky Café in Mountain View, collaborated with her kids' high school counselor Louis Tolbert. Together, they arranged an internship for students who were not expected to graduate. Instead of leaving them to languish in the classroom, these "at risk" kids were put in the Blue Sky Café's kitchen. They learned salable culinary skills while simultaneously earning the credits they needed to graduate.

Since then, Ewing and Tolbert have ushered up to 20 stu-

dents per year into some of the Bay Area's tonier kitchens, including Postrio in San Francisco, Spago Palo Alto and Kuleto's Italian Restaurant in Los Gatos.

Ewing says restaurants are eager to participate, as are area school districts. She estimates that the El Cajon Project has worked with two dozen restaurants and 11 school districts throughout the Peninsula. One day, she hopes to open a culinary school, possibly in the Bayview Hunter's Point area of San Francisco.



**Aram Mardigian, executive chef at Spago Palo Alto, works with students from the El Cajon Project.** PHOTO BY EL CAJON PROJECT

The need for such programs will continue. While California officially reports a graduation rate of 86.9 percent, a recent study by Harvard University suggests that the number of dropouts in the Golden State is actually much higher due to flaws in the way that the state collects data.

For the 2002-2003 academic year alone, more than 65,000 students in California dropped out of high school, according to Russell W. Rumberger, a professor of education at the University of California at Santa Barbara. The 2005 Santa Clara County Children's report estimates that the county's share of this number is at least 1,100 students.

In Santa Clara County, which has one of the nation's highest concentrations of educated people, a high-school diploma is the absolute minimum requirement to performing all but the most menial jobs.

Rumberger says dropouts will cost the state some \$14 billion in lost wages during 2002-2003. He also believes that increasing graduation rates has the potential to reduce crime. In California, a chilling 68 percent of prison inmates are high-school dropouts.

Admission to the June 5 brunch and auction is \$40 dollars. For more information, call 650-575-8897.

– Cynthia Marshall Schuman