

CERTIFICATION

A Certification Journey

By Nicholas Mercogliano, CC[®], Marlboro, N.J., a member of The ACF Jersey Shore Chefs Association

How many ACF members can say they knew they wanted to be a chef at age 14? How many of you took your CC practical exam at age 17? Did any of you catch a lucky break that resulted in your passion for a culinary career? While many ACF chefs can say “yes” to this last question, I experienced all the above.

My interest in the culinary field started at my local middle school in Monmouth County, N.J., when I was accepted into a four-year culinary-arts academy that taught me the fundamentals of cooking. I met Ben Ross in school, and I credit my good friend with indirectly helping me get my first real-life kitchen experience. Ben was working at Christopher's Cafe & Restaurant, Colts Neck, N.J., for owner/chef Christopher Klopsis and his wife Angela, who worked the front of the house. One day Ben was unable to work as busboy, and he asked me to fill in for him.

I worked every so often, covering for anyone who would ask. Eventually I developed a close personal relationship with the owner, Chris. As time progressed, I was able to observe how he ran the restaurant, what he did and how he did it. I started getting more and more dates to cover, and eventually became a regular part-time employee. Then one day I got my first chance at cooking. Chris found himself without the two chefs who usually worked beside him. With essentially no place to turn, he called early one morning asking if I could help cook instead of busing tables. I was more than excited, and found that this was really what I wanted to do for my career. As I began cooking in the restaurant, I realized all there was to learn about the world of cooking, and I decided to push myself.

I would get up at 5:45 a.m. each day, go to school, and then work at the restaurant starting at 3:30 p.m. On weekends, I would get there at 7:15 a.m. and help open. Chris said I was an excellent employee, and in my job as a chef's assistant, I performed duties such as hot- and cold-food preparation, including running the salad, sauté and grill stations. I'm grateful to Chris. During the time I worked there, he taught me so much about cooking and about running a business.

I decided to pursue the Certified Culinarian[®] (CC[®]) designation because this was now my career and it demonstrated a commitment to improving my skills. I had the work experience necessary by working at Christopher's Cafe, and I earned the continuing-education hours and took the mandatory courses I needed by taking courses online. I took the online written exam in April 2008, the practical exam in January 2009 at Hudson County Community College, Jersey City, N.J., and earned my CC in February. The practical exam was hard work and a little stressful, but I felt it was a rewarding experience. Part of my preparation included going to different kitchens and getting feedback from different chef mentors.

In July 2009, I started attending The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., where I hope to learn all the tools necessary to make my dream of becoming an executive chef a reality. I've enjoyed meeting new people at the CIA, and I'm impressed not only with the culinary education but also with how they teach students the professionalism needed to be a successful chef. In 2009, I received an American Academy of Chefs scholarship.



One day, far in the future, my goal is to obtain my Certified Master Chef[®] (CMC[®]) certification. In the meantime, I plan to upgrade my certification by testing for the Certified Sous Chef[™] (CSC[™]) level after I have a little more education and experience under my belt.

Whether you call it a defining moment or a pivotal point or fate, everyone has an event that shapes his or her life. Mine happened because my friend Ben couldn't bus tables one day.



Top: Nicholas Mercogliano takes a break from classes outside Roth Hall at The Culinary Institute of America. Above: He perfects his sautéing skills during high school training in 2008.

Share Your Certification Journey

The spotlight will be on you, ACF certificants, in 2010. Do you or a colleague have a certification journey that may inspire or encourage others to pursue their quest for ACF certification? If so, the Certification Commission would like to hear from you. Please e-mail certcommission@acfcchefs.net with your story idea for consideration for *The National Culinary Review* or the ACF Web site.