

# Caribbean kitchen

Teaching eco-tourism and foodservice in the Bahamas



In January, Gerald M. Brinkman and Michelle Bartell, both chef-instructors at Monroe Community College (MCC) in Rochester, N.Y., led 11 of their students to the Bahamian island of San Salvador for a two-week-long culinary field placement. The group was charged with the task of preparing nutritious meals for the 135 to 185 daily visitors to the island's Gerace Research Centre (GRC), a former U.S. Naval base that's been converted into an ecological research outpost for the College of the Bahamas.

Brinkman recently talked with *Chef Educator Today (CET)* about the challenges and rewards of this unique experience.

**CET:** How did you end up leading a group of students to the GRC?

**Brinkman:** In January of 2008, I had the good fortune to travel there as part of a Marine Biology class taught by [an] old friend and colleague ... I saw the potential for bringing a group of hospitality students to the field station to get experience in the operation of a foodservice facility in a far away place. ... As I began to flesh out the idea and make plans for the actual course work, I felt that a tie-in to eco-tourism, a very current hospitality topic, would be a natural fit with cooking in a far away place.

The official name for the course is: Eco-tourism and remote-location foodservice.

... We spent 10 weeks in class during the fall semester exploring these topics, testing recipes and planning for our excursion to the Bahamas in January.

**CET:** What were your goals for the trip?

**Brinkman:** General objectives [were to]: participate in all aspects of foodservice production in a place dependent on the outside world for its food supply; work with the GRC inventory and cycle menu to improve nutrition, especially vegetarian offerings; gain a better understanding of the difficulties of remote-location foodservice; experience the natural history attractions that draw people to far away places where hospitality infrastructure is limited; [and] work together as a team of foodservice professionals in a real-world situation.

We broke our group into two crews of roughly six students and one instructor and divided our time between working in the kitchen and exploring the natural history attractions of the island. There were two shifts: 6 a.m. to 1 p.m., breakfast and lunch service; and 1 p.m. to 7 p.m., dinner service. Each crew spent about eight shifts working with the GRC kitchen staff during our time there. While not assigned to kitchen service, the students spent time doing eco-tourism activities: snorkeling, hiking and exploring historic sites.

**CET:** What challenges did you face?

**Brinkman:** First, there was the reality factor. We spend so much time as culinary arts instructors in lab settings where we attempt to simulate a real work environment for our students. This was a situation that could not be simulated. ... At 7:30 a.m., 180-plus people would line up for breakfast, and it needed to be served. Period. No matter that the mail boat [that brought our food] was three days late, and the stores were seriously depleted. Better figure it out.

**CET:** What did you and your students learn from this experience?

**Brinkman:** Aside from the practical lessons ... the interpersonal lessons were the most important. The students and instructors learned key lessons in diplomacy and mutual respect. They learned lessons in flexibility and adaptability. Life lessons on how to handle yourself as a professional and as a visitor were central to the experience. All of these things made it so much more than a cooking lab experience that I believe it was life changing for many of the participants. I know it was for me.

*An extended Q&A with MCC's Gerald M. Brinkman can be found among the May "online extras" on CET's Online Tool Kit blog at [ChefEducatorToday.blogspot.com](http://ChefEducatorToday.blogspot.com).*

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