Background

Diversity in the United States continues to grow and with it comes an increase in the variety of foods available for consumption. As future foodservice managers, our students would benefit from a working knowledge of these foods. Thus, hospitality and dietetics programs are now offering courses that focus on culture and ethnic foods. To enhance experiential student learning in this area, hospitality faculty at a Midwestern university incorporated planned food tastings within a traditionally lecture-based class. Four discussion units focused on the most prominent cuisines that have influenced American Cuisine. Before every unit exam, students tasted four foods exhibiting the traditional flavors discussed. One challenge was addressing food neophobia, or a person’s inhibitions to try new or unfamiliar foods (Pliner & Hobden, 1992). Working with caterers, professors developed menus that were authentic and mindful of dietary/religious restrictions without being too novel.

Method

Students across four semesters completed several instruments to assess the effectiveness of the food tasting experiences:

1. Food Neophobia and Attitudes Toward Asian Cuisines
   - Students completed questionnaires to measure their level of food neophobia (Pliner and Hobden, 1992) and food attitudes (Aikman, Crites, and Fabrigar, 2006) before and after each Asian food tasting.

2. Student Rating of Instruction (SROI)
   - Students responded to the open-ended question “What about this course did you think was MOST valuable in helping you to learn?”

3. Evaluation of Course Objectives
   - Students were provided a course assessment survey separate from the end-of-semester SROI.
     - Part I of the survey measured how effectively the students thought the course objectives were addressed, covered, or implemented in the class.
     - Part II of the survey asked students to complete the open ended question: What are the top FIVE lessons you learned about food and world cultures in general?

Results

Program Assessment

1. Food Neophobia and Attitudes Toward Asian Cuisines
   - Pre-test results showed that food neophobic students had more negative attitudes towards the cuisines and were more likely not to have tried the cuisines previously.
   - Post-test results, however, showed an improvement in attitude and willingness to try the cuisines in the future.

2. Student Rating of Instruction (SROI)
   - Open-ended student feedback on class evaluations across fours semesters indicated that the food tastings were the most effective means to achieve the student learning outcomes designed for the class.

3. Evaluation of Course Objectives

Part I:

The food tasting sessions were designed to address the following course objective: Recognize, appreciate, and value the diversity of food from different cultures. On a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Very ineffectively) to 5 (Very effectively), this objective received a 4.70 ± 0.57 (M ± SD).

Below are some comments:

- Trying the different food tastings helped give better understanding/appreciativeness to the different cultures and cuisines.
- I really didn’t know anything about other cultures until this class.
- Opened my horizons to new types of food.
- Opened up my “box,” helped me try new foods and find new restaurants in F/M area.

Part II:

The top recurring answers all related directly to the food tasting sessions. It is apparent that the hand-on experiences achieved its objective. The following student comments say it best:

- Give everything a chance. If it looks good, eat it; if it looks bad, try it anyway. My “comfort zone” for food was expanded a lot.
- I learned to be more open-minded when it comes to food; not all stereotypes of ethnic foods as we know it here are correct. (Example: the food at Chinese buffets is not as authentic)
- Not all foreign food is scary. If immigrants are willing to eat our foods, I’m willing to eat theirs too.
- Bizarre foods in one culture are delicious in others. What one person finds gross, others may consider awesome or sacred (example-bugs, innards, cows, lutefisk).

Sample menu for European food tasting includes:

- caprese salad skewers
- antipasto platter (mixture of cured meats and cheese)
- honey ham and brie crostini with fruit chutney

Conclusions

Hands on experiences (food tasting events, group culinary experience at a local ethnic restaurant, and group presentations and discussion) strongly reinforced the lectures and allowed students to more fully internalize the subject matter.