

Big choux to fill

Making pastry isn't easy, especially for a big crowd, but that's exactly what Island School students did, writes **Lauren James**

Profiteroles should be crispy. That's what Island School food technology teacher Chris Lord told his students last week. "If they're not crispy all over, they're not done," he instructed the student bakers as they reached the crucial final stages of making choux pastry.

The school runs a series of extracurricular classes called Elements, designed to bridge the gap between academic study and real world skills. Students choose from a list of courses, each lasting half a year, and they spend three hours a week learning new skills.

The two food courses are some of the most popular Elements options, and focus on different themes every week. The students learned to make shortcrust and puff pastries in previous weeks, so by the end of November they had graduated to the tricky choux.

Half of the class focused on choux creations, while the others rustled up a Caribbean buffet, which was served to visiting students from schools from Asia and around the world later that evening. The visit was part of the International Schools Theatre Association (ISTA) festival, a weekend of theatre workshops led by visiting artists. The pressure was on to impress.



If looks are anything to go by, the Island School students have nailed the profiteroles. Photos: Lauren James

"It was really difficult making these eclairs," said Henry Smeaton, 14, who was carefully finishing his treats with patisserie cream inside and chocolate and freeze-dried raspberries on top. "The toughest part was the pastry - it was challenging making sure it wasn't soggy, but it turned out okay." His conscientious attitude paid off: Lord named him as one of the day's star bakers for his organisation.

The other half of the students were cooking Johnnycakes, Jamaican patties, jerk chicken wings and potato wedges flavoured with jerk seasoning, guided by food teacher Chileshe Chisulo. As Adeline

Tam, 15, stirred a huge pot of vegetables, she said that the Elements course had given her confidence to cook on her own.

"Every Friday I'll cook at home - something like pasta, rice or noodles. I don't like making a mess, but I've enjoyed trying new dishes," she said.

"This has been the most difficult though, because it's so big and you need to get everything right."

Two of the most experienced chefs in the department are Chiara Dadamo, 15, and Natasha Wang, 16, as they take the food tech GCSE and both Elements courses, which adds up to eight hours a week in the kitchens. Chiara explained that even the most experienced chefs often struggle with getting the notorious choux technique right.

Meanwhile, Natasha emphasised the importance of sticking to the recipe.

"Consistency is the most important part: choux can't be too loose or it loses its form, but if it's too dense it doesn't rise."

Last week, the Elements groups were hard at work baking treats for yesterday's "Island 5.0", the school's 50th anniversary party. Each chef had to spend 30 minutes manning the bake stall, selling festive treats.

"The students are fantastic," said Lord. "I like to let them guide their own learning and discover things for themselves."

He continues, "This course is the most popular of the Elements now - we even have a waiting list! Our main problem is getting students from other courses to leave the kitchen, as they invade at lunch thinking we're giving out free food."

Consistency is the most important part: choux can't be too loose or it loses its form



Adeline Tam (left), Henry Smeaton (above) and Natasha Wang (right) know cooking for a crowd of their peers isn't easy



Bakers got creative with their choux designs