

A Master at the Table

Melina Kelson explains why there's more to cooking than a career and how she prepares students to become lifelong learners.

It's 5 a.m., and Melina Kelson is already on campus. An hour later, the Kendall baking and pastry chef-instructor is conveying her love of artisan bread to students—with details that come with being one of the country's few Certified Master Bakers.

Her teaching duties officially end at noon, but she remains on campus for another two hours, ordering products and advising students. Then she heads home to Skokie, where she grows nearly 150 types of fruits and vegetables. That afternoon, she may harvest a bushel of peaches for canning or help leadership at her daughter's school make lunches more healthful and delicious.

"For me, cooking is not just a career; it's a lifestyle choice," says Kelson, the winner of a 2012 Leadership Award from *Modern Baking* magazine in the Industry Service category.

She isn't surprised by her life's direction, despite her initial plan to earn a bachelor's in literature from Ithaca College with graduate study in the same field. Kelson grew up the daughter of *Chicago* magazine's publisher and dining editor, and she first worked in a bakery at age 15. Before starting graduate school, she decided to enroll in a culinary program—and she's been cooking and baking ever since.

Kelson worked in both sweet and savory positions with caterers, bakeries and Chicago restaurants such as Spiaggia and Brasserie TI, but she always wanted to teach.

"I knew I needed different experiences to bring as much as possible to the table when I went into education," says Kelson, who joined the Kendall faculty in 2005. "I've always found tremendous satisfaction in my work, but I'm happiest when I'm teaching. It's extremely satisfying to help people meet their goals."

Kelson's goal is to prepare Kendall students for life as well as careers. "We teach problem solving and critical thinking," she explains. "We are preparing students to cook well, understand the business, move up in the kitchen and have long careers in the industry."

She also wants them to be excited about bread. "You're dealing with something alive," she says. "I love the process and the product."

Kelson serves on the board of the Bread Bakers Guild of America, and she brought its WheatStalk continuing education program and Coupe du Monde de la Boulangerie Team USA members to the Kendall campus. "It's important that students see how the craft can be pushed and is ever changing," she says. "I know the more I understand ingredients, the more I realize I have to learn."

