American Culinary Federation

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ACF Expands Access to Membership and Certification for Culinary Students

JACKSONVILLE, FL – July, 24, 2026 – Beginning August 1, 2026, the American Culinary Federation (ACF) will provide complimentary Associate Membership to students enrolled in American Culinary Federation Education Foundation Accrediting Commission (ACFEF AC)-accredited Culinary Arts, Baking and Pastry, and Food Management programs, making it easier for the next generation of culinarians to connect with the profession from the start of their careers.

As part of the initiative, students who successfully complete an accredited program with a final grade of 70% or higher will also receive complimentary ACF certification based on their educational attainment. Eligible graduates will not be required to complete separate written or practical certification exams associated with their educational level.

According to ACFEF Chairperson **ACF Chef Barry Young, CEC, CCE, AAC**, the initiative is designed to remove barriers to professional membership and certification while strengthening the connection between culinary education and long-term career development. "The goal is to give more students access to networking opportunities, scholarships, educational resources and professional credentials that recognize their achievements and support their career growth," he says.

The initiative is expected to impact thousands of students each year. Currently, ACFEF accredits 422 programs across 197 postsecondary institutions in 40 states and nine countries, as well as 155 programs at 131 secondary institutions in 22 states.

In addition to certification, students will gain access to a wide range of ACF benefits, including the Online Learning Center, webinars, podcasts, student competitions, Chef's Table, local chapter involvement, and professional networking opportunities.

Educators from accredited programs say the change could have a meaningful impact on student engagement and long-term involvement in the profession. "It strengthens the value of ACFEF-accredited education because it is a tangible credential that students will have in their hand, not something they have to take additional steps to acquire," says **ACF Chef Thomas Recinella, CEC, AAC**, Dean of Culinary at the Culinary Institute of Michigan. "The value of that really cannot be overstated."

Chef Recinella believes the initiative will encourage graduates to remain active in both certification and professional membership throughout their careers. "They are more likely to renew because they are already members," he says. "They are more likely to pursue that next rung in the certification ladder because they already have the first."

For many students, cost has historically been a barrier to pursuing professional membership and certification. **ACF Chef Gabi Wilson**, Culinary Arts Instructor at Bishop State Community College (AL), says the initiative addresses a challenge faced by many community college students. "Most of our students have a very limited budget and rely heavily on

financial aid to cover the costs of school," she says. "By offering complimentary membership and certification, ACF is inspiring students to take their education and career goals seriously."

While membership and certification will be provided at no cost, ACFEF officials emphasize that certification standards remain unchanged. Students in accredited programs are assessed throughout their education against ACFEF Required Knowledge and Skills Competencies, which are designed to ensure graduates meet the standards expected of certified culinary professionals.

ACF Chef Yudel Torres, CEC, CEPC, Culinary Instructor, Assistant Coach of Team CINY and ACF's 2026 U.S.A.'s Chef of the Year, says certification represents far more than passing an exam. "Earning my Certified Executive Chef and Certified Executive Pastry Chef certifications represented years of training and dedication to the craft," he says. "I want students to understand that becoming certified isn't the end of the journey – it's the beginning of a career built on continuous learning. Our industry is always evolving, and the chefs who continue to grow are the ones who stay committed to improving every day."

Chef Wilson says students who earn certification through their accredited program will better understand the connection between classroom performance and professional achievement while gaining access to mentorship, networking opportunities and future certification pathways – the first steps, she says, of a career built within the ACF community.

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About the American Culinary Federation (ACF)
Founded in 1929, the American Culinary Federation (ACF) is the leading professional organization for culinarians in North America. ACF advances the culinary industry through education, apprenticeship, certification and professional development while providing opportunities for networking, leadership and lifelong learning. Through its nationwide network of local chapters, industry partnerships and the American Culinary Federation Education Foundation (ACFEF), ACF supports chefs, culinary educators and students while promoting excellence across the foodservice industry. For more information, visit http://www.acfchefs.org/.

About the American Culinary Federation Education Foundation (ACFEF)
The American Culinary Federation Education Foundation (ACFEF) advances culinary education through scholarships, educational grants, workforce development and accreditation. Its Accrediting Commission (ACFEF AC) accredits postsecondary and secondary Culinary Arts, Baking and Pastry, and Foodservice Management programs that meet rigorous standards for curriculum, faculty and student outcomes. Through these initiatives, ACFEF strengthens the quality of culinary education while helping prepare the next generation of culinary professionals.