



Lights, camera ...cook!

FOOD LOVER'S CULINARY STUDIES CAPTURED FOR TELEVISION SHOW

By Andrew Coppolino

IMAGINE YOU'RE on your feet in a stressful, highly competitive, and hot and physically demanding environment for long hours each day.

Now imagine all of those factors with the prying eye of a television camera capturing every moment, every bead of perspiration and every wincing expression as you worry something has gone wrong with your sabayon.

Such is the crucible for Kelsey Murray of Guelph as she learns the intricacies of becoming a professional chef at Canada's pre-eminent cooking institution — the Stratford Chefs School — at the same time her scholarly and culinary endeavours are broadcast across the country on the Food Network's popular show *Chef School*.

Kelsey Murray of Guelph is in a docu-drama called *Chef School*, shown on the Food Network.

The docu-drama traces the trials and tribulations (and the terrines and tourtières) of 12 students. Like the Stratford Chefs School in general, the cast of *Chef School* is a microcosm of the Stratford school with its varied personal backgrounds and range of talents when it comes to knife-skills, handling sauté pans, and training sensitive (or not so) palates.

Such diversity gives the show a lot of the tension and drama that made the first season so successful for the show's creator, Red Apple Entertainment of Toronto. That diversity and drama will be the setting for Murray during the show's sophomore year, slated to begin airing Sept. 30.

The Montreal-born Murray, 19, graduated from Centennial Collegiate Vocational Institute and has lived in Guelph since 1999. As it seems to be with many cooks, there was something innate, a culinary "hard-wiring," that attracted her to the kitchen.

"I don't really know what it was, but it was one of those things growing up. My mother and grandmother are good cooks and although they didn't pursue it professionally, they got me into it. Ever since I was 12, I've wanted to go to chef school."

And so she did, with the Stratford Chefs School as her choice.

Her television "career" began soon after when Red Apple contacted the school about documenting the daily culinary progress of the class. Interested students were invited for an interview in Toronto, and 12, including Murray, were chosen from the 30 entering Stratford that year.

Filming for the show was challenging and time-consuming, taking place during lunch hours, after school and heavily on weekends. The subjects of the weekly television program receive a nominal honorarium: "They put in a lot of extra time as a result of their involvement in the show," says Rachel Low, president of Red Apple Entertainment.

Murray has no insight into why she made the cut: "I have no idea. I really don't know what they were looking for."

The range of personalities obvious on the show is perhaps an indication: Daniel



“It was very hard to balance the school work and the show. . . . When we weren't in school, which is intense enough, we were filming, so I'd be pulling all-nighters trying to get my work done.”
Kelsey Murray

Gelfant, the show's executive director, refers to Murray as "a gift."

"She's spunky and spirited and not afraid to show who she is."

Yet, in the first year, there were logistical issues to getting Murray, one of the youngest subjects appearing on *Chef School*, on camera — specifically her youth. "We couldn't shoot her in social scenes (where alcoholic beverages were being consumed) because of her age," Gelfant says.

In the second year of *Chef School*, however, Murray will have a significant role, hints Gelfant. "She's thoughtful, talented, emotive and has growth potential both as a chef and for the story. I think Kelsey's going to come from the back of the pack."

Previous restaurant experience might be what gives Murray an edge. Having worked

as a cook in restaurants like the Aberfoyle Mill while at high school and at the Fat Duck (a Guelph "gastro pub" with a Stratford Chefs School alumnus behind the stoves) gave her some ability to handle the tough regimen of the world of cooking.

"The school is gruelling. They take what you know and re-teach you everything. At the end of it, your head is so full you don't think you can learn anymore."

Murray, who recently graduated from the school (she spent the summer cooking at an exclusive Muskoka golf resort), envisions herself as an executive chef one day and wants to explore what she calls "Canadian" cuisine.

"We are so multicultural that we don't really have a defined cuisine, so I'm interested in cooking with local ingredients that are native to Canada."

As for her exposure to a national television audience, Murray is calm — likely a useful trait in the stressful, high-pressure world of a professional kitchen.

"It's strange, it hasn't really kicked in yet. I see myself on TV, and it's like watching your yearbook. It's hard to explain. There is so much that went on for such a short program, but I think they capture life at the school well.

"It was very hard to balance the school work and the show. All students would get assignments, but (the show's subjects) had little or no free time. When we weren't in school, which is intense enough, we were filming, so I'd be pulling all-nighters trying to get my work done."

But then Murray adds that the demands of her documentary television "performances" have likely toughened her resolve to become a chef. "I think, if anything, I learned more from balancing the two. For first year, my marks weren't great but second year I came back really well, actually."

Irrespective of the time-consuming, hectic nature of blending cookery training with a starring role on the small screen, Murray says, "I think I would do it all again. I really do." ☺