

A day in the life of a reality television star

Chefs are big news right now, with Gordon Ramsay berating students in Hell's Kitchen and Emeril Lagasse yelling BAM on his show, The Essence of Emeril

In this area when you want to be a great chef, you go to Chef School in Stratford.

Richard Francis left rehab and walked into Chef School as part of his life makeover. Born in the Northwest Territories, the 31-year-old native man moved to London with his family in 2005 and pursued his career as a journeyman carpenter. Having fought a 15-year addiction to alcohol and drugs, he is now crafting fine cuisine instead of houses, learning a career that he loves and raising a family in London - and as part of all of this he is also one of the stars of Chef School now on the Food Network.

9:00 a.m. Up and at 'em at Avery House, the 'Big Brother' type of house where many of the Chef School stars reside, rented for them by the producers of the show Red Apple Productions. Francis is beat this morning since returning from the school's biggest annual fundraiser, a swishy \$500.00 a plate dinner in Toronto the night before. Students prepped food, transported it to Toronto for the event, cooked, served and cleared up. "I'm a little drug out," admits Francis with a half smile.

Luckily for him, the first class - on the business side of running a restaurant - has been cancelled because the guest teacher had a conflict. Students, who did show, take off for breakfast.

The Stratford Chef School was established in 1983 by local restaurateurs Eleanor Kane and James Morris in answer to a "local labour need for well-trained chefs who can jump into a very busy kitchen for Stratford's seasonal business," according to Kane. It's a two year program and is the only school, not including community colleges, authorized by the province to train chef apprentices. Morris estimates that the school has produced nearly 500 chefs thus far.

10:30 a.m. Second class of the day, called Gastronomy, features short talks by several area farmers. They enlighten the students on buying local produce and meat from niche producers for the freshest, highest quality ingredients. Chef School students are destined for employment in fine cuisine eateries. Many have plans to start their own restaurants; such is the case for Francis. His dream is to partner with his wife - who is studying holistic healing methods - running a high-end restaurant featuring fine Aboriginal cuisine. "I can see it all," passion ringing in his voice. "It will feature modern Aboriginal art, and we'll serve food based on native recipes, using wild game, as much as possible."

12:15 p.m. Eating lunch at Pazzo Pizzeria, Francis elaborates on his roots and

how he became a student again at the age of 29, coming back from below the bottom of the barrel to one of North America's elite cooking academies. After leaving rehab, Francis moved to London to be with his then girlfriend, now wife Cherisa Francis - a student at Western - and his son Holden (8) and daughter Danelle (6). He interviewed for the chef school in 2006 and received funding from his band to pay the tuition soon after. He explains the big career swing from carpenter to chef like this. "I had this urge inside of me but didn't know how to act on it. After rehab, I had a lot to figure out." He credits a talented therapist at the rehabilitation centre for helping him to realize that his problems with alcohol and drugs stem from childhood fears, and in many ways it would seem that he was playing out an all-too-typical story of drug dependency that many natives fall victim to. "I don't blame anyone for my problems with drugs. That's not my parents or society. It was mine to deal with and now I have," Francis declares. Most of Francis' family members have been impressed and supportive of his big life change. Even his dad - who thought cooking was for girls when Francis started at the school - has come around and now fully supports his son's efforts. In the Northwest Territories, he shot, froze, and shipped, the caribou that Francis used in his final cooking exam.

1:15 p.m. Strolling down the alleyway back to Rundles, a fine dining establishment owned by James Morris where much of the teaching takes place, so it's also where much of the filming of the Chef School show happens. The film crew is in place and catches Francis as he walks down the alley and into Rundles. He changes into his chef's whites in the men's dressing room, caught on film by the crew.

Red Apple Productions has a crew of 10 on site for filming today. They'll capture footage of a pastry class and one of the students' tests. This is the second year for the class featured in the show, and they graduate at the end of February. Teaching modules are followed by testing, and since this is billed as a docu-soap, much of the angst of the show revolves around the students' performances on tests.

These tests can challenge cooking skills as well as the students' courage. One of Francis' favourites was a black box challenge. In the style of Iron Chef, the students are given mystery ingredients from which to prepare fabulous dishes. That particular competition was won by Francis. His dish - elk tenderloin crusted with pistachios and black pepper sauce - fit right in with his penchant for wild game cookery, so he took it with ease.

Another great moment came as part of the school's Celebrity Chefs-in-Residence program. Francis won a cooking challenge, turning out a top-of-the-line bass dish. His prize, a weekend of cooking at New York restaurant Tabla with celebrity chef Floyd Cardoz. Besides having some great cooking lessons and seeing the city, Francis discovered his love of the tasting menu format and now uses it exclusively in his own home catering business. "It's times like that when I feel like

I've come so far," he says.

1:30 p.m. Pastry class with Chef Neil Baxter begins. Baxter is an award winning chef, putting Rundles on the international culinary map with a four-star status in Toronto Life Magazine and several awards, including Toronto Culinary Guilds' Silver Ladle 'Chef of the Year' award. He's a chef in the classic French cooking vein and has the "Yes, Chef" temperament to go with it. According to his bio in the Food Network-produced press kit for the show: Always committed and passionate, Neil has been known to fly off the handle when angry.

The atmosphere in the kitchen is tense as cameramen, sound operators and associate producers mill about. He's not allowing filming, as yet. The students start their pastry lesson by softening butter, banging big chunks of it on the metal table with big, wooden rolling pins. As noise builds, so does the tension and soon Baxter is cancelling shooting for the day, saying "too many . . . cameras." When questioned about the decision, Baxter cancels class, as well, ordering the students to clean up and "get out of here."

Assistant producer for the show Anna Ceraldi is surprised. "We've been shooting since October and this has never happened. It's certainly not typical." But she can't hide her consternation at having a 10-person crew prevented from shooting.

Besides the footage that they've already captured in the alley and the dressing room, the crew is allowed back into the kitchen to shoot a scene in which Kelsey Murray is evaluated on her ethnic black box event.

The shooting schedule will go on for two more weeks to wrap up the season and the student's school year, so Ceraldis is not too worried about getting what they need in the long run.

This type of reality documentary is shot without scripts or stage direction, with no makeup or special costumes. The relationships between the students are genuinely good or bad; their real life is captured as closely as possible. For instance, Francis feels a bond with fellow students Ben Sachse and Tim Bresserer. Similar ages (Tim is 35) and no background in cooking are two things that Tim and Francis have in common, while Ben (28) is "genuine," says Francis.

Conversely, he doesn't hide his dislike of Joyce Singh, calling her "phony." "With all I've gone through, I just don't have time for people who are like that."

Francis has taken fellow student Alex Landheer under his wing from time to time. At 22, Chef School is Alex's first experience away from home, and he can react unpredictably at times. Francis uses meditation and yoga to help him balance the demands of the strenuous pace of the school and has tried to help Alex with similar methods. "I know what he's feeling," says Francis.

This feeling of connection isn't universal, though. Since he's a parent, Francis says, "They [the other students] don't live the same life I do." He adds that he hates living in the communal environment of Avery House and misses home life with his children terribly. He goes home every weekend to spend time with the family, or they visit him in Stratford. The kids will be featured in one of the episodes this season. But Francis is very conscious of the opportunities that this experience and education are providing him. "I know I owe a lot to Eleanor and Jim; this is the opportunity of a lifetime."

Eleanor Kane thinks that being a part of the Chef School reality show experience has added a new dimension to the education experience for students involved. "Being in the show has changed them in a way they maybe don't understand. It gave them a way to articulate their desire to show that they do 'have what it takes' . Maybe it gave him [Richard] more of a chance to explore and define what his motives are in taking on the training and to articulate his goals when he's finished with his training. The one-on-one interviews with them unravel their aspirations and motivations. It's very good for these young people to get closer to their own story."

3:30 p.m. Leaving for Avery House, Francis is stopped by Matt Duffy, who is on the hot seat as head chef for a practical lab at The Old Prune, another fine dining establishment in Stratford. Each student is expected to be head chef for a night, crafting the menu and supervising the kitchen and service completely. Matt Duffy asks Francis to be ready to help prep tomorrow morning for the evening's meal.

3:45 p.m. Back at Avery House, Francis checks his email on his laptop, set up on the dining room table of this eclectically decorated house. He's looking for a confirmation of an interview with a chef at a restaurant in New Brunswick and messages from his kids.

Francis knows that he still has learning to do before he realizes the dream of opening his own restaurant and wants to work with chefs with similar cooking philosophies to his. "In my kitchen, I'll never let anyone say 'Yes, Chef'. Everyone has something to contribute and no one is better than anyone else."

With dreams for his own elite eatery and perhaps even his own show on the Food Network some day, Richard Francis has left behind a life of ruin, been on a reality show, earned his credentials as a chef, has his own small catering business and wants to excel at the job he loves most - being a great parent. Francis says that he's learned how he wants to live the rest of his life, now that he's been to dark places within himself during rehab. "When you live your life with intention, you aren't scared; you have purpose."

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Don't know what high-end Aboriginal cuisine might look like?

This is Richard Francis' menu that landed him at the top of his class for his final exam.

First Course Trio of Duck

(duck cooked three ways in small servings on a single dish)

- Arctic Tea Cured Duck Breast with Roasted Beet Salad and Cloudberry Reduction
- Pan Seared Foie Gras and Baked Apple with Maple Pepper Glaze
- Duck leg Roulade and Squash Custard with Orange Cumin Sauce

Palate Cleanser

- Cranberry Cedar Sorbet and 'Medicine' Smoke (smudging ceremony)

Second Course Arctic Sampler

- Black Pepper and Vanilla Crusted Caribou Tenderloin and Iroquois Cornbread with Wild Blueberry Blood Sauce
- Butter Poached Nunavut Muskox and Wild Rice Mushroom 'Risotto' with Elk Marrow Bordelaise and Pheasant Berry Compote