

A taste of excellence

Stratford Chefs School opens up its renowned kitchen to local media

By Brian Shypula

Staff reporter

As I tie a white apron around my waist, one cord breaks and the stitches in the other disintegrate. The well-laundered garment is left hanging awkwardly from the loop around my neck.

“That means you’re going to have bad luck in the kitchen for life,” Richard Maloney, innkeeper/chef at Rundles Morris House where we’re making lunch with visiting Quebec City chef Yvan Lebrun, tells me.

It’s not what I want to hear. I love to cook and do most of the meal making at home.

Curious about this cooking lore, I press Mr. Maloney to explain.

“I just made that up,” he replies, smiling.

We laugh and he helps me find another apron.

Good to go, I look to Chef Lebrun for a task.

Look is the operative word. The native of France speaks little English and my high-school French is as worn as that first apron.

Earlier, through translator Rosaire Roy I asked what the chef’s advice would be to amateur cooks trying to tackle a gourmet meal.

Don’t be misled by the chefs on TV cooking shows who make things look so easy, he says. All their ingredients are prepared in advance and they can film as many takes as they need to get it right.

“You can’t prepare as you go.”

He lives the words. Chef Lebrun and his wife Rolande Leclerc, a dynamo who handles front-of-house in their award-winning Quebec City eatery, Restaurant Initiale, located in a historic bank building in the Old Port, have been at Morris House since 6:30 a.m., nearly three hours ahead of the arrival of five print journalists who are going to help make a three-course lunch. They’ve done most of the hard prep work.

I’ve been watching the Food Network series Chefs School filmed at the school. I’m remembering the words of advice Rundles Restaurant chef Neil Baxter, also the school’s master of cuisine. “Be a sponge.”

I want to absorb, and pray I don't hear 'grab a sponge' when it's time to clean up.

My first job is chopping celeriac or celery root into matchstick thin slices.

Even though I've julienned lots of vegetables, I feel all thumbs. Not good when working with a big, sharp knife.

"Tuck in your fingers," Andrew Coppolino, a freelance food writer from Kitchener, reminds me.

I get the knife into a rocking rhythm and soon the celery root is ready to be sauteed in butter and olive oil. I add salt, pepper and the juice of half a lemon. Curious, I pluck a few of the too-thick slices from the pan to try when no one is looking. I don't think I've eaten celery root before. It's good.

But I'm surprised when Chef Lebrun hands me a jar of crunchy peanut butter. Peanut butter and lemon? I stir in two tablespoons, followed by about a cup of cream.

"Bon?" I ask. "Bon," he answers. Good.

Encouraged by this small success, I try my hand at folding sheets of crepe pastry into triangles filled with a chocolate, hazelnut and butter concoction. Considering I think I failed cut and paste art class in grade school, the dessert pieces turn out decently. I even coach Jill Worthington of the London Free Press through one. She high-fives me.

They'll go in a 350F oven later for 10 minutes, emerging crisp and golden.

The kitchen with all its stainless steel counters and big six-burner gas range is a cook's dream.

There are compliments all around as we eat family-style at a round table in the architectural marvel of a home that belongs to Stratford Chefs School co-founder James Morris.

I could use a lot of words trying to describe both the lunch and the previous night's dinner at the Old Prune. I'd need a lot of help from Google to explain dishes like brandade (a pounded combination of black cod, olive oil and cream) that looks like a spoonful of mashed potatoes from a distance.

A critique of the meals and wines supplied by Niagara's Lailey Vineyards and wine importer Tony Hirons of Merchant Vintner is better left to experienced critics like James Chatto of Toronto Life magazine, also the chef school's gastronomic writer in residence who was seated at my table at dinner. There were too many firsts for me food-wise — truffles, guinea hen and buckthorn berry among them — and the wines in the mid-\$20 a bottle range were a step up from what's in my basement, to offer much in the way of critical analysis and context.

Who knew a rutabaga could be made to taste so delicious?

Suffice it to say Chef Lebrun masterfully creates dishes that are both intense in flavour and a clever blend of textures.

Through his wife, he explained the mix of soft and hard textures are meant to lend completion to the taste, not to oppose each other.

The chefs school brings in celebrity chefs like Chef Lebrun for a week in residency to give its students wider exposure to the culinary world.

Next week it's Paolo Lopriore of Il Canto in Siena, Italy.

Eleanor Kane, the chef school's other co-founder, says the visiting chefs help raise the school's profile nationally and internationally when they tell their chef friends about Stratford.

They also provide a great chance for people in this area to try fine dining a bargain price, through the school's Dinner Club series. Memberships start at \$100 and the dinners range from \$35 to \$75 a person, including wine — a bargain for the quality of the food. Lunches are \$15-\$20.