

Canadian show 'Chef School' follows wannabe foodies



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The 12 members of 'Chef School,' now airing on the Food Network

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The joys, trials and tribulations of gruelling hours in an attempt to become a chef began unfolding on New Year's Day, when a remarkable series airs on Food Network Canada.

"Chef School" goes behind the scenes in 13 episodes airing Tuesday nights at 10 p.m. ET, following a group of students through a tough program at one of Canada's eminent culinary institutions, the Stratford Chefs School.

The first episode repeats tomorrow night at 11 p.m. on the Food Network before a new show Tuesday.

"The school gets under the skin of these young people as far as their motivation, what brought them into the cooking world and what they hope to get out of it," explains Eleanor Kane, co-founder with James Morris of the school, which celebrates its 25th anniversary next year.

It was founded in 1983 by Kane, who co-owns the The Old Prune Restaurant, and Morris, owner of Rundles Restaurant, favourites of Stratford Festival theatregoers and tourists alike.

They established the school to produce chefs for high-end restaurants. It operates over the four-month term from November to March using the two restaurant kitchens as classrooms when they are closed for the season.

"It's a bit like boot camp in the first year," says Kane. "The students are given a total immersion into the fundamentals of good cooking week by week."

And that includes being drilled in the foundations of classical French cuisine and the culture of haute cuisine under the guidance of Neil Baxter, executive chef of Rundles Restaurant, and Bryan Steele, executive chef at The Old Prune Restaurant.

Baxter, who serves as Master of Cuisine at the school and who with Steele and Kane appears in the series, says the filming, which took place over most of the four months of instruction earlier this year, was difficult to get used to.

"With all the film crew in the kitchen while we were holding a class (it) was awkward at first, but as the weeks progressed we got used it and tried not to notice they were there."

Baxter says that sometimes they would get certain people to work with one another.

"It was an unscripted filming where they shot scenes that were just part of the normal program."

Prominent chefs from top restaurants in cities like New York, Toronto and Vancouver were invited to the school during the production to judge the students' cooking.

"And those days were a little more stressful in the kitchen knowing they were being judged on what they had prepared that day," Baxter says.

The four female and eight male students are shown in and out of class from dawn until dusk, from the time they get out of bed until they finally relax at the end of the day.

Baxter adds that the school sets a high standard and "we try to get the students to reach that standard.

"That gives the students the incentive, don't shoot for the sky, shoot for the moon."

Jeff Crump graduated from the school in 1997 and called it a stress-filled, action-packed experience.

He was able to view a few episodes prior to their airing in January, and says what he saw was very similar to the experience he had as a student.

"When I saw those young students on the show it brought me back to how hard the work was," says 32-year-old Crump, who now heads his own kitchen as executive chef of the Ancaster Old Mill just outside of Hamilton.

"Chef School" is produced by Red Apple Entertainment of Toronto.