

Cooking up controversy

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Two students are late, one dish is burnt, another is half raw and a third is swimming in fat. Chef Neil Baxter looks deeply, deeply pained.

"You're breaking my heart," he says as he watches one student butcher an assignment.

Things aren't going so well for the first year class at the Stratford Chefs School, which means they are going very nicely for *Chef School*, the new reality-TV series that follows a class through two years in this prestigious training program for the culinary arts.

"It shows all the kind of joys and sorrows of students in this program. It's very true to the experience," observes Eleanor Kane, owner of The Old Prune restaurant in Stratford, Ont., and co-founder of the school.

Kane and fellow restaurateur James Morris, owner of Rundles, founded the school in 1983, launching classes in the off-season when both the Stratford Shakespeare Festival and these high-end restaurants are shut to the public. The school, the only model of its kind in the country operated by working chefs and restaurateurs, rapidly gained a reputation for producing graduates ready for Canada's top kitchens. It has alumni working everywhere from Sooke Harbour House on Vancouver Island to Scaramouche and Jamie Kennedy Kitchens in Toronto.

With its graduates also opening a range of local eateries including the York Street Kitchen and Bijou, the school has helped solidify Stratford's reputation as a culinary destination as much as it is a theatre town. A reality series on the Food Network? It's the icing on the cake.

Thick, gooey icing as it turns out: The first episode of *Chef School* devoted a great deal of time to a dispute over who was to get the best room in the bed-and-breakfast where six of the students lodge, building the mouthy Alex Landheer up as the character who is going to be trouble. Then the second episode included observations from the students about the sexual attractiveness of the others; this week, Mike Brennan and Kelsey Murray will pair off to much commentary from their peers.

"Some of what we are seeing we have never seen before," Kane says with quiet understatement. "As directors of the school, Jim [Morris] and I are going, oh, my goodness. ... But that's how it should be, the students have an after-school life."

Last week's episode was much more tightly focused on the trials and tribulations of cooking as Baxter, who is the chef responsible for the famed kitchen at Rundles, gave the students their marks on their first exam.

"We found as the series went on, a lot of it came from the food," said Rachel Low, executive producer of the series and president of Red Apple Entertainment. "It wasn't about who is sleeping with who."

On the exam, the cocky David Lingard, who has the most prior restaurant experience of the bunch, got his comeuppance when he burnt a piece of salmon. And Landheer was finally reduced to silence when he was caught using the wrong utensils yet again and got the lowest mark in the class. This week, the students move to the kitchen at the Old Prune, where chef Bryan Steele will supervise them as they prepare competing stir-frys to win a day in the kitchen of Rain, a leading Asian restaurant in Toronto.

The producers of *Chef School* selected 12 of the 36 students enrolled in the 2006-07 year as the ones they wanted to follow, and characters are certainly starting to emerge. There's the inspirational story of Richard Francis, who grew up on a reserve in the Northwest Territories and wound up in a drug-and-alcohol rehab program in Toronto: He is now trying to put his life back together with equal doses of yoga and cooking. The erudite Andrew Coristine was about to launch into a PhD in physics when he switched career tracks and readily admits he knows little about cooking. The flirtatious Allison Jones, a former pastry chef who the producers are setting up as the class hottie, wound up in tears this week when she discovered she doesn't know the difference between a fish chowder that is flavourful and one that is tasteless.

"They want to be chefs but they haven't really thought about what it is," observes Low. "It was dramatic. This wasn't a bunch of super highbrow candidates. ... We live in a culture where chefs are such celebrities, but we found such a gap ... and that made it fascinating."

Indeed, the would-be restaurateurs can seem painfully unsophisticated. They have been shown rolling their eyes at a port-and-Stilton tasting, puzzling over public-speaking classes and complaining bitterly about Morris's movement classes. He believes that service in the dining room should be balletic.

Low, who was initially approached by second-year student Crystal Asher with the idea for the show, said it seemed like a natural for reality TV. Red Apple soon dismissed the idea that it needed to add any extra element of competition, such as a prize for the best student.

"If we really trusted our gut feeling about it, the elements were there. Here are a bunch of people who are basically marooned in a small town, and some of them are going to live together," Low said. Still, it took Red Apple 1,000 hours of footage from the classroom, the bed-and-breakfast and local bars to produce their first 13-episode season.

Behind the scenes (and with advance knowledge of what's to come), Kane says things are going better for everyone as the cameras follow the group into its second year. The TV crew is faster and less intrusive: It has learned how to get what it needs, she said. *Chef School* producers have revealed that one female student will fail, but the remaining 11 are

prospering. If they were sometimes too immature to seize learning opportunities in Season 1, Kane can report that a recent parmesan-and-Barolo tasting produced nothing but silent appreciation as the cheese and wine worked their magic.

Chef School airs Tuesdays at 10 p.m. and Sundays at 11 p.m. on the Food Network