

Go with the pro for some great portobello

Chef School's big cheese on the art of grilling mushrooms

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Spoiler alert! Recently, I was a guest critic on an episode of Food Network Canada's Chef School. Already taping its second season, this culinary reality show, which follows the lives of 10 students through the gruelling process of becoming Stratford Chefs School chefs, debuted in January and the second season will follow in October.

The second season sees the students taking on the role of executive chef -- leading a brigade of their peers through a dinner service at The Old Prune in Stratford, Ont., where they recreate a visiting top chef's menu. Two "VIPs" are booked for each so-called "dinner lab" to critique each dish and provide commentary as the "lab" (read: meal) progresses.

Cut to food writer Jacob Richler and me, seated at a corner table in the elegant restaurant.

We learn that tonight's student chef is Joyce Singh, who gives a perky welcome speech, saying the meal is going to be "awesome," and that she learned a lot from celebrity guest chef David Gilbert, who is here by way of the Rugby Grille in Birmingham, Mich.: "He's only been here for two days but he's had a huge impact on us," she enthuses. Let's hope not too big.

In a dinner that ran from a raw white mushroom and verjus marinated foie gras tarte to a bowl of tepid potato mousse topped with thyme ice cream, sadly, there wasn't much positive to be said for the food. But at least it will make for good TV.

Here's a much more successful dish, a delicious salad by Stratford Chefs School chef/instructor Neil Baxter. Cook it up -- then I'll come over to critique it.

GRILLED PORTOBELLO MUSHROOM SALAD WITH GOAT CHEESE AND PICKLED EGGPLANT

(Serves 8-10) - $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (175 mL) soft goat or sheep cheese - 1lb(500g) small red potatoes, cut into small pieces, edges trimmed - 16 slices pickled eggplant with onion mixture (see recipe below) - 12 oz Soiled Reputation salad greens (or any good quality field greens) - 4 cloves garlic - 1 cup (250 mL) parsley - $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125 mL) extra virgin olive oil - 12 portobello mushrooms, stems removed - salt and freshly ground black pepper - 1 cup (250 mL) kalamata olives, sliced into thin strips - 4 tbsp (60 mL) basil oil (solids reserved) - 4 tbsp (60 mL) ordinary vinaigrette (see recipe below)

For the salad

1. Using coffee spoons, shape the cheese into small quenelles. Place them on plates lined with cling wrap.
2. Place the potatoes in a large pot and salt the water lightly. Boil the potatoes until just tender, then drain and place them in a bowl with a little warm water to keep them from drying out.
3. Strain the pickled eggplant mixture, reserving equal amount of eggplant and onions.
4. Using a blender, make a coarse puree of the garlic, parsley and extra virgin olive oil.

Grilling the mushrooms

1. Preheat grill. Brush portobello mushrooms with some of the garlic parsley puree. Season, then grill the mushrooms gently on both sides, brushing with more of the parsley puree as needed.

Pickled eggplant

(Makes about 45 slices) - 5 Japanese eggplants, sliced diagonally, 1" thick - 3 yellow onions, peeled, cut in half and thinly sliced - 2 medium tomatoes, quartered, pulp removed, cut into thin slices - 4 cloves garlic, peeled - 1 large sprig thyme - 3 cups (750 mL) pure olive oil - 1 cup (250 mL) extra virgin olive oil

- ½ cup (125 mL) balsamic vinegar - 1 cup (250 mL) sherry vinegar - 1 cup (250 mL) red wine vinegar - 1 tbsp (15 mL) coriander seeds, crushed - 1 tbsp (15 mL) black peppercorns, crushed - 1 tsp (5 mL) black mustard seeds - 2 tsp (10 mL) honey - 1 bay leaf - ½ tsp (2 mL) salt

1. In a non-reactive saucepan combine all the ingredients except the eggplant. Bring to a boil and allow to simmer gently until the onions have softened lightly.
2. Add the eggplant and simmer until the eggplant is tender. Transfer to a clean container and allow to cool. Store in refrigerator.

Vinaigrette - 3 tbsp sherry vinegar - 1 tbsp balsamic vinegar - 1 tsp shallots, finely chopped - ½ cup pure olive oil

1. Combine all ingredients, whisk, place in a squeeze bottle and reserve.

To serve

1. Grind some black pepper over serving plates, and place three quenelles on each plate.
2. Toss the eggplant onion mixture with the black olives and basil paste, add two tablespoons of vinaigrette, season lightly. Place small mounds of this mixture between the cheese quenelles.
3. Lightly dress the salad greens and place a small mound in the middle of the salad plate, barely covering the goat cheese.
4. Add the warm potatoes. Drizzle a small amount of basil oil around the plate and place a few mushrooms on top of each salad. Serve immediately.