

Stratford's Chef School

By Emma Waverman



Chef Neil Baxter, Eleanor Kane and Jim Morris surrounded by students in a publicity photo for the TV series 'Chef School'

Do you love cooking? Have a passion for feeding people? Love to critique every morsel? And has the recession driven you to fantasies of being a chef? Before you start filling in the application think carefully - being a chef takes more than passion and a good palate. It takes discipline, knowledge and technique.

Jim Morris, co-founder of the Stratford Chef School has seen hundreds of students start in the two-year program but very few rise to the top. "Passion is not enough; chefs need to have discipline as well."

Sadly, that one sentence summed up why I, and so many others are on the other side of the stove ordering the food instead of cooking it.

Morris, along with fellow restaurateur Eleanor Kane started the Stratford chef school with the intent of turning out the country's chef/owners. And for 25 years it has taken chef wannabes and turned them into a vital part of the country's restaurant brigade.

Carl Korte co-owner of Scaramouch is a grad, as is Dan Donovan from Jamie Kennedy Kitchens. Media darlings Mark Cutara of Cowbell graduated in 1998 and Cory Vitiello chef/owner of The Harbord Room is an alumnus from 2000.

Stratford offers a two-year program which is relentless in its expectations and breadth. Each session lasts 16 weeks during the fall and the students are expected to have paid internships over the summer. The students may have never heard of Escoffier when they walk into the school but they certainly know all his methods when they leave. Students start with boiling and work through a French-based program and when they are done they should be able to dream up and most importantly, execute high-end cuisine.

Eleanor Kane is co-director of the school and owner of the Old Prune says, "In the first year the students study traditional methods based on the classical method." Kimberly Payne, the executive director laughs when she remembers walking into one of Kane's first-year classes. "There were slides and slides of classical paintings about food!"

In the second year the students are invited to explore Canadian and international ingredients and technique. The entire program is extremely rigorous and if you have tuned into the Food Network's reality show Chef School, which was shot at the school a few years ago, you would know that the students are under constant stress.

The students learn all aspects of the restaurant business including purchasing, sanitation as well as cooking. In fact, Morris teaches a movement class which uses techniques of ballet,

yoga and strength training to teach the students how to move quietly and confidently while laden down with trays.

After spending a day at the school and meeting the characters involved, you get a sense that this is not your ordinary community collage. James Chatto, well-known food writer and the school's inaugural writer-in-residence, says "It's nice that Canada has an authentically eccentric school."

The Stratford Chefs School differs from other culinary programs because it is restaurant-based. Morris owns the esteemed Stratford restaurant Rundles and Kane is the proprietor of the famed Old Prune. They started the chef school to create a workforce for themselves and the other busy Stratford restaurants. It also balances out the seasonality of the restaurants based in a town that hosts one of the country's busiest summer festivals.

Students learn and practice in the restaurants' kitchens and they are taught by the executive chefs. In fact, touring around Rundles in the middle of winter, dodging desks and spying on students learning how to make fougasse and other breads, it is hard to imagine that this is a fine-dining restaurant in the summer.

The Old Prune acts as the student's test kitchen and lab and they offer a three-course meal which is open to the public at a reduced price. These dinner labs showcase the students growing talent and come with a survey at the end so the diner can practice their critic skills.

The Celebrity Chef in Residence is a focus of the school's programming. The school scouts out international up and comers to come to the school and work closely with the students for a week at a time. "We try and find people who are on the way up," said Morris. "A number of years ago we had Jean-Georges Vondrichten when he only had one restaurant." Up and comers are willing to work with the students, adds Morris. Culinary stars may not want students to interfere with their creations and deny students the hands-on experience they are looking for.

The visiting chefs give the school an opportunity to show off the school and its cuisine to local media and alumni. This year, local media were given a cooking class (and lunch) by modern Italian chef Riccardo Camanini from Villa Flordilisa in the Lombardy region.

Camanini is a charming and passionate chef who is eager to push the boundaries of Italian cuisine while still paying homage to his roots. And in true chef-style he didn't really let us lay people get our hands on the food until it was beautifully laid out on the plates.

Their second visiting chef, Nuno Mendes, a London-Based Portuguese chef who specializes in molecular gastronomy showed the students some modern techniques and ingredients. He cooked an anniversary lunch in Toronto where he used some of his tricks of the molecular trade: propane burners, sous vide and an algenate-based preparation for soup.

The students were keen to learn some avant-garde techniques and both chefs were impressed with the commitment the students showed to both new and old world cooking.

Canadian superstars also visit the school regularly and they never put on airs, said Morris. It is one of the most popular parts of the program.

Michael Statlander, Jamie Kenendy and Keith Frogget all make regular visits. While the other chefs pre-plan the menu, Statlander arrives with the menu on the back of the truck, says Morris who clearly likes to have things well-organized in advance. "But the way he works has its own kind of creativity," he adds.

The School tries to bring in the best ingredients possible. The manic organic, Antony John supplies a lot of the produce from his neighbouring farm. "We try and source the best of the best of Canadian ingredients, says Morris.

They are also trying to source the best students possible. If you have seen the Chef School series then it is not a leap to say that it is hard to imagine some of the students owning a Scaramouche-style restaurant. Historically many of the students have come from the small towns surrounding Stratford, some of them straight out of high school. In order to attract a

more diverse student body the school has hired a recruitment officer and is appealing to chefs to send their talented people to them.

The school is part of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities apprenticeship program which defers some of the costs of the tuition. To qualify as an apprenticeship applicants have to have six months working in a restaurant or catering facility.

This may deter some of the laid-off Bay Street types who are dreaming of starting their own restaurant with their severance package. Stratford Chef School is looking for people who have shown a commitment to the stove in the past and who will be the stars of tomorrow.