

Ready to be flambéed

Chef School needs a little fire to get it going

Robert Cushman, National Post Published: Tuesday, February 19, 2008

I recently found myself helping with the cooking at Rundles. Rundles is the most highly rated restaurant in Stratford, Ont., which is saying something.

Usually, when I go to Stratford, my main purpose is to see plays. But in between shows, one has to eat; and for years now, Stratford has been one of the best places in Canada in which to do that.

During the winter, when the theatre festival shuts down, most of the top eating places do likewise. Their chefs and proprietors occupy themselves at the Stratford Chefs School, which each year takes on a dozen prospective cooks and has its own culinary stars, plus "celebrity chefs" from here and abroad, to teach them.

The school is now the subject of a reality TV show, Chef School, which is why I was one of a select party of journalists assembled in the kitchen. We were getting a taste, so to speak, of what the students went through. Mercifully, nobody filmed us while we were getting it.

I was lying when I said I helped. All I did was wave a blowtorch in the direction of a square of sweetened pastry whose intended destiny was to form the outer casing of a delectable morsel billed on the menu as "caramelized Russian pastry." My blowtorch technique, though, was lacking, and my contribution ended up charred, blackened and discarded.

We were working according to the instructions of Matteo Baronetto, an impossibly young-looking maestro from Milan (he was 30, but I was reliably informed that he had to produce ID when attempting to buy cigarettes); we subsequently ate an amazing lunch for which we had some theoretical responsibility but that really came down to Matteo and his assistant. The previous evening we had eaten an almost equally spectacular dinner cooked by the students under Matteo's direction. Take it from me, the Stratford Chefs School is doing good work.

That said, it deserves a better TV show. Chef School falls into a familiar trap. In following the fortunes of its dozen aspirants, it stakes nearly everything on "human interest."

The young people we meet (their median age is early 20s), furiously interacting with one another, might be training for anything. Jim Morris, who runs Rundles and is co-director of the school, observes at one point that there's "a crazy element to people who cook for a living."

The opening episodes have been higher on craziness than on cooking, which, for a show airing on a specialty food network, is rather curious. As a group, these kids - - rowdy and uncertain and swearing a lot -- are much like any others. The only thing that makes them interesting is what they're studying.

There are long stretches when the show might better be called All About Alex. Alex is a bushy-eyebrowed 21-year old who seems to have antagonized all his fellow students. He enraged them on the very first day by arriving early and grabbing the best room in the residence. (I can't see what was so terrible about that. Somebody had to do it.)

He needs, according to his schoolmates, to always be the focus of attention, and the show certainly gives it to him. "I don't know what's wrong with Alex -- the way he works," somebody says, to which he responds -- at least the editing makes it look as if he's responding -- "I'm not a train wreck ? I like to cause accidents."

The school, like the restaurants behind it, has an eclectic approach to cuisine -- unlike, as Morris points out, a typical French cooking school --and it has an extra-culinary curriculum that is similarly wide-ranging.

The philosophy of Morris and his co-director Eleanor Kane (proprietress of the Old Prune, another of the town's finest) is that "students must learn to be articulate about culture and cuisine." So there is, among other things, a yoga class, which seems to work for Alex.

Stress levels rise, obviously, for the first class evaluation, which is the subject of the show's fourth episode. There was still a bias towards the banal: We had a montage of people saying "it's exam day" and telling the camera they were

nervous about it. We got the point. But this instalment was still the best to date because it was what they, and we, were there for.

Assigning the dishes and judging the results was Neil Baxter, Rundles' chef and therefore quite likely the best in the country. He seemed to be a very calming presence, but also seemed quite perturbed by much of what he witnessed. He's the kind of teacher who's so gentle he's cruel, because you want so much to please him and his judgments are delivered in such pained, measured tones.

Everybody emerged with a passing grade, even Alex who announced, "I'm on the road to perfection," and then proceeded to drop stuff. "I've got a lot on my plate now," he said afterwards. (I'm not picking on him; the show does. And who knows, he could get his own series out of this.)

Another student, Joyce, was praised for the quality of her sweetbreads but chided for serving them on a brown paper towel. Then there was David who unhappily charred his arctic char. "I wouldn't consider it burnt, exactly," he said, but it sure looked burnt to Chef Baxter, and even to me; since David was the student with the most professional experience, it was comforting to see that it could happen to him too, though he understandably didn't see it that way.

The Stratford Chefs School runs a two-year course, and there's always attrition in the second year. So there's pressure. Chef School the show tries hard to make us feel that pressure but doesn't seem to trust its subject. That's the trouble with reality shows. They aren't very real.

- Chef School airs tonight at 10 p.m. ET on Food Network Canada.