

Haute cuisine a la twenty-fifth
Stratford Chefs School continues to impress

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By Adam Gardiner

I am seated in the rear dining room of The Old Prune restaurant, enjoying a truly ethereal dinner on what would have otherwise been a drab Tuesday night. My mouth still buzzing from the texture of purple potato dust atop tender, candied cod, I am suddenly swept away by the *al dente* linguini, its robust flavour declaring itself sensuously on my tongue. A course of sea scallops is next – the most perfectly prepared scallops I’ve ever tasted – followed by a melt-in-your-mouth rum babas cake so delectable I’m tempted to look for more. My senses satisfied from the four incredible courses, my face flush from the wine that accompanied each one, I rest my head back and smile, nearly forgetting how I came to find myself in this otherworld of couture culinary delights.

Then I remember: I’ve been invited here as part of the Stratford Chefs School (SCS)’s Media Day. An annual event made for the appreciating, Media Day offers a select few reporters what the illustrious SCS culinary program is all about – largely through the food, of course.

This year, with the SCS celebrating their 25th anniversary, they had plenty to share.

My evening actually began overlooking the Avon River in that stunning, square piece of concrete and wood architecture beside Rundles restaurant on Cobourg Street, otherwise known as the guest house of SCS co-founder Jim Morris.

There, in between small talk and sips of rose wine, Morris, fellow co-founder Eleanor Kane and SCS executive director Kimberley Payne talked about their school’s program, still unique in that its students are trained right in working restaurant kitchens with working restaurant professionals: “not in a lab,” as Payne puts it. Forty-two students spend a rigorous first year learning food history and the cooking traditions of the classical French model popularized by Auguste Escoffier. That springboards 30 of them into year two, where they are exposed to world-class cooking talents who, as Kane says, “open their eyes to possibilities in technique.”

Enter the “celebrity chefs”: scouted by Morris and Kane from around the world, they come to the SCS in January to influence those second-year students’ sense of culinary style. The celebrity chef for our week is Riccardo Caminini, from the Michelin one-star *Villa Fiordaliso* restaurant in Italy. There, I am told, Caminini is renowned for his unique interpretation of Lombardy cuisine, the Italian region from which he comes.

I know the man is one good chef. It’s he who created the meal my fellow journalists and I so sumptuously enjoyed at The Old Prune. But while that dinner out was delightful, it was also an example of one of the school’s real-world evaluations – testing students on a variety of restaurant roles. Some worked in

the kitchen to prepare Caminini's menu, others served the wine, and some even took front door duty, collecting coats and ushering us to our tables. When I klutzily knocked my knife to the floor, one student produced a gleaming replacement before I even thought to ask. Every job, no matter how menial, was watched; every performance, ultimately, was judged.

"You want them to be close to the food; you want them to be close to the patrons too," explains Payne, who says students practice every aspect of the restaurant business to learn how it all comes together, ultimately to offer the best patron service possible. Even Caminini, Payne says, reads the local newspapers while in town so he can carry on a conversation with his customers.

We eagerly meet Caminini in the Morris house kitchen the next morning: he's going to prepare lunch for us, and we've been invited to help. A gently charismatic man, with a confident face and a warm, rich Italian accent, he explains the rationale behind our lunch menu *du jour*, his broken, imperfect English offering a haiku-like glimpse into the culinary genius of his mind.

"I always try to make dishes with two flavours," he says, drawing attention to the two-tone risotto and foie gras with amaranth he's about to prepare. "It's very important to have a lot of contrast inside our mouths." Equally as important, he says, is the science of taste, understanding how food registers one flavour in the mouth and another in the nose. "You close your mouth and listen with the flavour there [in the nose]," he says.

Our cooking tasks are minimal, mine being to wave aubergine through a pot of hot oil to make it crinkle into twisted shapes. For the most part, we stand back and enjoy watching Caminini work: it's a dance, between he and his sous-chef, Laurant Paccini, of precise movement, clear communication and impeccable timing. It's a dance every chef needs to perfect; undoubtedly, it's a dance every graduate of the SCS will be required to learn.

Lunch, as expected, is as spectacular as the dinner the night before. As we *mmm* and *wow* our way through the dishes, Caminini finishes his kitchen work, anxious to leave so as to spend enough time in class with his students that day. It's then that I realize just how immensely those students will benefit from Caminini's expertise.

As a fine cheese is passed around for the final course, I reflect on my evening and morning at the SCS, and I realize that the institution is one 25-year-old vintage worth savouring. If the stunning, student-prepared dishes, all-encompassing curriculum and mastery of the instructors is anything to go by, the school still has what it takes to make the best graduates in the industry – and it's more than poised to stay at the top.