

CHEFS

Visiting Stratford Chefs School

Where we ask, "What is an Epigram?"

By Cecilia Buy

“Good things come to those who wait.’ Well, having done a fair bit of that over the years, I was quite chuffed when our editor offered a new assignment: to represent **eatdrink** at a media event hosted by **Stratford Chefs School** (SCS).

A future issue of **eatdrink** will have more about the SCS. This article chronicles my introduction to that establishment, and to some of the people I met there.

The first step was to check in at Bentley’s. The casual pub atmosphere of this restaurant/bar belies the quality of the rooms at Bentley’s Inn. My “loft” room offered main floor sitting area (small), bed with Tempur-Pedic mattress (large), and a wall mounted plasma TV (medium). Stairs led

to the bathroom and a smaller sleeping area with gas fireplace and another TV. The view from the two-storey windows was of Albert Street and Stratford’s old Victorian-style City Hall, flag flowing from the tower against the clear blue winter sky.

Just before six o’clock, I met my fellow “media guests” at the reception area, and under the guidance of Falan Hamilton of High View Communications (the School’s public relations firm), we walked over to Rundles. My colleagues were Heather Rivers (reporter for *The Sentinel-Review* in Woodstock), Andrew Coppolino (*Kitchener-Waterloo Record*), Brian Shypula (*Stratford Beacon Herald*) and Jill Worthington (*London Free Press*).

Rundles is one of Stratford’s premier din-



Stratford Chefs School co-founders James Morris (of Rundles Restaurant) and Eleanor Kane (of The Old Prune Restaurant) have remained intensely involved in the school’s operations since 1983.

ing establishments, but more relevant to the purpose of our visit is its connection to the Stratford Chefs School. Owner James (Jim) Morris, along with Eleanor Kane of The Old Prune Restaurant, co-founded the school in 1983. The school itself is located on the same premises, and uses many of the restaurant's facilities in the course of educating future culinary professionals.

Once inside Rundles, chilled only slightly during the brisk walk, we surrendered our coats and climbed the stairs to a small sitting room. Richard Maloney, innkeeper and chef at the Rundles-Morris House (more about that later), welcomed us with glasses of Prosecco, and we joined those already assembled. As well as Mr. Morris and Ms. Kane, the company included Tony Hirons of The Merchant Vintner, James Chatto, renowned food writer and currently writer-in-residence at the SCS, and another eminent food writer, and best-selling cookbook author, Elizabeth Baird.

A short while later, refreshed, entertained, informed and relaxed, it was back into coats and gloves and scarves. We stepped out to walk the few blocks to The Old Prune Restaurant.

An integral part of the course curriculum at the SCS is the Visiting Chefs program. Tonight, we were looking forward to a dinner prepared by Chef Yvan Lebrun of Restaurant Initiale in Quebec City. Students of the school would be assisting Chef in the kitchen and working front of house. Roland Leclerc is Chef's wife and business partner, and Maitre d' at Initiale. She backed up the students in the dining room, and proved every bit as ebullient and professional as I had heard.

Once seated, and provided with water and a glass of wine, we enjoyed brief talks from Elizabeth Nowatschin (the evening's Student Chef), Matthew Consiglio, (student and Maitre d' for the event), Wine-maker Derek Barnett of Lailey Vineyard, and Mme. Leclerc. Our meal then proceeded through five courses, each paired



The Rundles-Morris House provides a stimulating setting for the school and its visitors.



with a wine from Lailey. Included on the menu were Kadaiff of Pork with Foie Gras and Leeks, and Roast Lamb Loin Epigram

(look it up yourself) with Mustard and Rutabaga. The dessert course included a Sabayon of Maple Syrup, and was served with another Lailey triumph, Vidal Icewine 2005.

Such dinners are offered throughout the school year, and provide the dining public with a marvelous opportunity to experience the skill of great chefs that would otherwise be attainable only with greater distances to be traveled, and considerably greater outlay.

Perhaps the conversation wasn't as sparkling, witty and urbane as I would like to recall, but the combination of food, wine, service, people and atmosphere made it seem so. I hope our hosts enjoyed it as much as we did, even though the evening was really part of a PR exercise.

Mid-dinner, I stepped as unobtrusively

as possible into the kitchen, and stood quietly in a corner for a few minutes, curious to experience the atmosphere. Consider: we have one of Canada's leading chefs, a Frenchman by birth, producing a complicated menu for about 30 discriminating patrons and assisted by ... students. I was prepared for shouting, Gallic curses and sneers, cringing students, perhaps flying pots or even sharp cutlery. None of it. Chef and his brigade pursued their craft in quiet conversation, smiling, occasionally laughing, moving so smoothly as to seem choreographed. I later asked Rolande Leclerc if this was her husband's usual *modus operandi*. Was he controlling himself for the occasion, or perhaps restrained by the language barrier? No, she laughingly reassured me. What I had witnessed was Chef Lebrun in his element, behaving as per usual.

One final cup of coffee, and a thoroughly enjoyable experience came to an end. Outside the night air was bracing, and with snow crunching beneath our boots, we wended inn-ward through ever-so-lightly falling snow. (The ladies and gentlemen of

the press reconvened a bit later for a night-cap, but sensibly retired at a reasonable hour. Our "work" was to continue next morning, with the summons of the school bell.)

Next day we met at Features, on Ontario Street. Eggs Benedict had been the intention but (perhaps it had something to do with last night's dinner) I chose a lighter breakfast. Quick and friendly service, a great menu—I've found a new favourite place in Features.

Then off again towards Rundles. Our destination was not the restaurant itself, but a building next door. The Rundles-Morris House was designed by Canadian architects Brigitte Shim and Howard Sutcliffe, and exemplifies their trademark style. Lots of wood and windows, and an airy ambiance underscore relationships between the construction, its environment and the people who live in it. When the owner is not in residence, the house can be rented. For this morning, the house was ours to enjoy, and in a few hours we would sit down to lunch in the dining room, with a



Chef Yvan Lebrun, centre, of Quebec City's Restaurant Initiale and one of the "Visiting Chefs" enriching the Stratford Chefs School curriculum, shares a technique with some earnest journalists.

floor-to-ceiling view towards Lake Victoria.

But we had to sing for our supper, so to speak. Today we were the kitchen brigade to Chef Lebrun. With humour and much beaming encouragement—but very little English—he put us through our paces. Potatoes were chopped, baby bok choy blanched, celery root sliced, and sauces stirred (on a Thermidor Professional range). Admittedly, Chef did the serious work (including preparing the treasure: black truffle from Perigord), and we had translators in both Mme. Leclerc and Rosaire Roy. Richard Maloney kept us supplied with refreshments and graters and rolling pins and whisks and a number of very sharp knives.

Partway through the morning, we were joined by Jacob Richler, who came to know Yvan Lebrun in the course of working on his current project. We can look forward in some months to the publication of his book on 10 top Canadian chefs. I confess to being somewhat overcome. Jacob Richler! Mordecai's son! Jacob Two-Two in the flesh! He must be fed up with it. At any rate, Mr. Richler was game to take part in the preparations, and joined us for lunch, as did Eleanor Kane. Tony Hirons arrived to be sommelier to our group. Among the wines that he presented with lunch were a Pouilly Fume 2004, from Domaine de Berthiers, which was paired to great effect with the opening course, Fish Brandade and Shellfish Bisque. To go with the dessert (various lovely chocolatey things), Mr. Hirons poured an intriguing and unusual Barolo. The recipe for Barolo Chinato calls for an infusion of rhubarb root, cinchona bark and a number of other aromatic herbs. Full-bodied, of course, it is slightly sweet, with a somewhat medicinal (but by no means unpleasant) finish. While interesting on its own, this Barolo Chinato proved its depth when savoured with the chocolate.

All good things come to an end, and with coffee cup drained, thank-yous said, hands



shaken and cheeks kissed, it was back to London. My companion for the drive? Nat King Cole, with “The Frim-Fram Sauce.” ◀

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Reservations Recommended