

Perfection on a Plate

Delayed but not discouraged, StepUp's editorial team gets the VIP treatment at Canada's most prestigious culinary school.

It was to have been a divine meal: stuffed onions, roasted lamb shoulder with *ponte nuovo* potatoes and artichokes, pasta with broccoli and a luscious lemon torte, all artfully prepared by the emerging talent of the Stratford Chefs School, under the watchful eye of Bryan Steele, Senior Cookery Instructor and Chef de Cuisine at the Old Prune restaurant.

It would have been an evening to remember, but unfortunately, we were to have none of it. Pounded by gale-force winds, blowing snow and freezing rain, we were forced to cancel the inaugural cocktail reception and dinner that would have welcomed the Step Up editorial team to this highbrow culinary institution. While my head grudgingly heeded the emergency weather warnings, my stomach was sulking.

Yet even in the face of such brazen climactic events, the Stratford Chefs School doesn't disappoint.

The next morning, under sunny skies, our team is welcomed to Rundles-Morris House for a cooking class with none other than Paolo Lopriore, the Celebrity Chef in Residence visiting from Hotel Certosa di Maggiano, a luxurious five-diamond convent-turned-country-inn in Siena, Italy. At fifteen degrees below zero, this crisp Canadian morning must feel a long way from the olive groves and vineyards of Lopriore's home, but the fruits of his creative genius welcome us instantly into the kitchen. Stepping past a pair of champagne bottles chilling in a snow-capped patio fountain, we are greeted at the door by the enticing aromas of fresh vegetables, licorice, and fragrant oranges.

Rundles-Morris house is the perfect spot for such an epicurean nirvana. Its stainless steel kitchen occupies the ground floor of a modern architectural gem that's juxtaposed against the historic surroundings of downtown Stratford. We can see through the back door that our kitchen is just a half-flight of stairs away from the renowned culinary school, which operates from the adjoining Rundles restaurant in the off-season. Overlooking the Avon River, this quiet retreat seems a world apart for us, but not for Chef Lopriore, who periodically excuses himself to bolt up the stairs and check on his pastry students. In Rundles kitchen, they are in the midst of twirling and stretching elegantly long Italian breadsticks called *Grissini Torinesi*, which bear a marked resemblance to conductor's batons.

In the chef's absence, we are entertained by our delightful hosts: Richard Maloney, the Rundles-Morris in-house chef, and David Lester, owner of Stratford's The Three Houses Inn. Fluent in Italian, David has graciously stepped in to translate for Chef Lopriore during his visit to the school.

The caliber of international guest instructors that the Stratford Chefs School has been able to attract in its twenty-five year history is nothing short of phenomenal, for the program here is intimate, grueling, and respected worldwide. Co-founded in 1983 by James Morris, owner of Rundles and the adjoining Rundles-Morris House, and Eleanor Kane, owner of the Old Prune, the Stratford Chefs School was conceived as a private, non-profit culinary institution that would produce chefs for high-end restaurants. A resoundingly successful venture, the school boasts a graduate employment rate of 100%, and its alumni are sought after by the finest restaurants in Canada and abroad. Over 450 students have completed the program to date, including such well-known Canadian talent as Dan Donovan, Managing Director of *Jamie Kennedy Kitchens* and Carl Korte, owner of *Scaramouche* restaurant in Toronto.

According to co-founders Morris and Kane, The Stratford Chefs School's unique success lies in the fact that it is the only Canadian culinary institute operated by working restaurant professionals.

"Typically, cooking schools hire an instructor who may have been a chef at some point, even 20 years ago, but has gone out of the business and is now teaching," explains Morris. "But the (restaurant) business is one where we are constantly having to re-invent ourselves. We have to stay current for our own purposes, and we are keenly interested in involving guest instructors to help our students do the same."

And along with picking up on the latest trends, the school aims to teach graduates how to create their own signature Canadian style.

"We talk in the school about developing skills in cooking, but also in culinary intellect," reflects Kane. "We want to produce a 'thinking chef', one who can articulate passion both on the plate and in their ideas about cooking. We train them to source the finest and best ingredients and to support the producers of those ingredients. We tend to embrace that philanthropic approach, and it plays out in our work in restaurants."

This passion is certainly evident in our kitchen, where just this morning, Chef Lopriore has taught us how to sauté eggplant without drying or discoloration, how to eliminate the bitterness typical in celery, and how to best bring out the fragrant sweetness of onions. In contrast to my guerilla-like tendency to hack away at whatever happens to be in the crispier, the Chef turns each morsel tenderly, lovingly. The dishes are his creations, and he nurtures them to perfection.

In no time it seems, our group has chopped, grated, laughed a lot, and polished off a fountain-chilled bottle of champagne, at which point our hosts invite us to sit down to an exquisite lunch in the bright and inviting Rundles-Morris House dining room. There's Sicilian-inspired sweet and sour shrimp with eggplant caponata,

followed by white risotto with licorice, orange and fresh fennel – and the aromas alone make this meal worth the trip. Each course is savoured, and paired exquisitely with wines from Airen Imports (the Australian 2006 David Traeger Verdhelho is the group's hands-down favourite). In the end, there's not a single bite left on anyone's plate.

We settle back to enjoy a lovely cup of coffee and a pan pepato soufflé with rum foam – Chef Lopriore's modern take on gingerbread, created with white bread, ground pepper and Italian chocolate nougat. The unique combination is pure perfection, and as Chef Neil Baxter, Master of Cuisine at Rundles explains, it's an example of the creative, yet demanding gastronomic approach that Stratford students are urged to embrace.

“We challenge our students to prepare a level of food at the standard we would prepare in our own restaurants,” says Baxter, who has been a cookery instructor at the school since 1985. “People come to the school because they want to reach a very high standard, and we keep challenging them and asking them to reach higher and try new things.”

With graduates being scooped up by such well-known establishments as Rain (Toronto), the York Street Kitchen (Stratford) and Langdon Hall (Cambridge), the profile of this culinary institute has long been top-notch among industry insiders.

But this year, the school has become even more widely recognized, thanks to the world broadcast premiere of *Chef School*, a 13-episode reality series airing on the Food Network. Dubbed by producers as ‘one part kitchen boot camp, one part gastronomic finishing school’, the series shows a side of the Stratford institute that's intensely dramatic -- but by all accounts, a fair representation of the training experience.

“There's a fair amount of competition, and a great desire to succeed,” says school co-founder Eleanor Kane of the themes that are played up on the show. “We see how minor mistakes can have a large impact -- affecting students as they strive to make things better the next time.”

As for the Step Up staff, I'd say our experience couldn't have gotten any better – at least once the weather cleared up. With gifted chefs, delightful hosts, exquisite food and fine wines, our time at the Stratford Chefs School was anything but a tough day in class.

It was quite simply, the Best Workday Ever.