

food & leisure

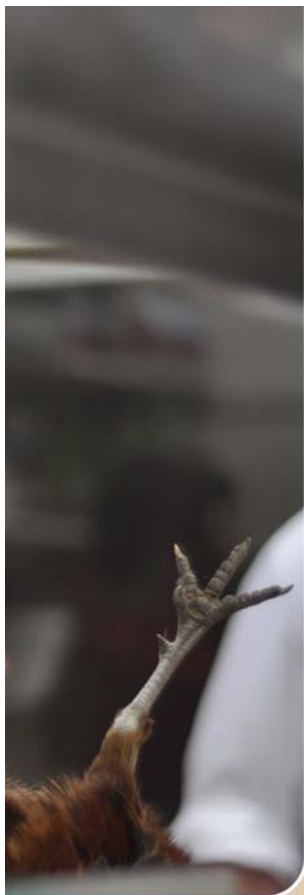


# *an* Appetite for Change

**Rather than settle into retirement, this former AbitibiBowater employee embarked on a new and exciting career.**

*By Andrew Coppolino Photos by Michael Fullerton*

**Should Jim Sampson** ever hang out a shingle to announce the opening of his restaurant, it will no doubt include a dash of inspiration from a Michelin-starred French chef with whom he shared duties in the kitchens of the Stratford Chefs School – one of his recent experiences that, up until a few years ago, was merely the stuff of dreams.



Until April 2008, Jim was a maintenance planner for the AbitibiBowater paper mill in Grand Falls-Windsor, Newfoundland. At 56, he retired from his career at the mill. His desire was not to become just another superannuate, though. Instead, he was eager to embark on the next phase of his life – and a gastronomic one at that.

Like many of the students who succeed at cracking the considerably challenging code that gains them access to Ontario's Stratford Chefs School, Jim has entirely detoured his career – and his retirement – to enter the demanding, and rewarding, profession of cookery.

### **An entrepreneurial spirit**

It's simply a case of what's bred in the bone for Jim. "It's completely different than my career. I've always liked to cook and come from a large family of brothers and sisters who all like to cook. When we were kids, we were involved in the kitchen," he says.

Don't get him wrong – he wasn't itching to get out of the paper industry because he didn't like it. He says he had a great career, and it treated him well (and he it). It's just that for many years, the entrepreneurial spirit had been emulsified with the spirit of the brilliant French chef Escoffier and was simmering gently within him on the back burner like a rich stock built up from its mirepoix base.

"I wanted to have my own business and the restaurant industry was really appealing to me. God knows for why, but it was!" says Jim.

He started the first year of his two-year chef-school stint while on a leave of absence from AbitibiBowater. After that, there was no looking back. He was not even deterred by the age (almost generational) gap between him and many of his fellow Stratford students. Most of them were young enough to be his children and would often ask Jim, "Do you work here?"

Each Stratford term runs from roughly October to the end of February. Its low student-to-teacher ratio (about 12:1) positions it as one of the best culinary programs in North America. The practical side of learning takes place in the professional kitchens of Stratford's The Old Prune and Rundles restaurants; the theoretical education occurs in the classrooms.

Covering every area of gastronomy and the finest points of culinary craftsmanship, students need to amass 6,000 hours of on-the-job experience including 1,440 in-school hours. Successful apprentices then write their "papers" to earn certification as journeyman cook.

The terms, says Jim, "are compressed with long days and

long hours. I was excited about doing the program and though I wasn't surprised by it, the workload was intense."

Such an extreme schedule could lead to mental and physical burnout for some; fortunately for Jim, he's well trained in endurance. In his spare time, he's a long-distance runner. He and his daughter, Jennifer, 32, completed the National Capital Marathon in Ottawa in 2007, and both qualified for the Boston Marathon in 2008. Jim completed that event in a respectable three hours 47 minutes. "I was 55 and the very next day I got word from my employer that I was getting a retirement package. I was quite pleased," recalls Jim.

Obviously, standing over scorching hot flat-tops and bubbling cauldrons amidst the flashing steel of razor sharp knives and other kitchen equipment is not an easy task and requires a certain state of mind. That is perhaps why, upon graduation, Jim has planned a short sojourn to the tranquility of his cottage on the coast of central Newfoundland, in order to set

out a strategy for his new career as a restaurateur.

"My wife (Monica) and I will formulate some plans. We're thinking of a café-bakery sort of establishment in the daytime with perhaps a table d'hôte in the evening," he says.

Jim will be applying his chef school technical training, theoretical foundations, and the inspiration he found in the kitchens and front-of-house at The Old Prune and Rundles to create a new take on traditional east coast cookery. "Absolutely, this is one of the things I'm really keen about," he says.

"There's a lot of good, traditional Newfoundland food, and I want to take that food and techniques and do it in a little different style. The same ingredients and tastes but with a new approach and presentation."

For that Jim, who also has a business education background from Memorial University, will need strong restaurant business and management skills in addition to the kitchen training. "I would be hard pressed to say that I could have gotten better training," he says about the Stratford school. "I was really pleased about the combination of the culinary training and the business principles: restaurant business and food costing, restaurant design and atmosphere."

Jim was also inspired by working with nationally and internationally recognized visiting chefs, and the technical and aesthetic expertise of Stratford's primary cookery instructors, Bryan Steele of The Old Prune and Neil Baxter of Rundles. And he points to collaborating on a dinner with "celebrity chef in residence," Michelin-starred Alexandre Gauthier, only 29 years old, as an experience without parallel.

## About Stratford Chefs School

### Opened in 1983

It is the only culinary training institute in Canada run by working restaurateurs.

It can accommodate up to 74 students at a time.

Graduates have gone on to work in commercial kitchens all over the world, from California to New York to Ireland.

It is located in the city of Stratford, Ontario, named for Stratford-on-Avon in England and famous for its annual Shakespeare Festival (since 1953).

With Gauthier, Jim was responsible for ordering the food for the night's menu and assigning responsibilities of the kitchen brigade (sous chef, patissier, garde manger, entremetier, saucier etc.). Gauthier directed the brigade with Jim as "aboyeur," or expediter, who receives orders from the dining room, relays them to the various station cooks, then examines the completed dishes before they are served to the customer.

Having observed Gauthier, whose Auberge de la Grenouillere is located in Montreuil-sur-Mer, France, Jim is quick to dispel the mythic image of the raging celebrity chef fuming with invective, as seen regularly on television's "Hell's Kitchen" featuring chef Gordon Ramsay. In fact, Jim found that his laid-back personality meshed well with Gauthier's generally calm and cool demeanour.

"You get the idea (from television) that they're shouting and bawling and that things are really tense. But I didn't see any of that from these notable chefs," Jim says. "They are calm and cool. It's a sign that they know what they are doing. I'm really impressed by that."

### **Creative energy separates great chefs from good ones**

Gauthier's style was a prime example of what Jim calls "out of the box, with his own way of presenting." (Incidentally, the expletive-spewing Ramsay has said that the frog legs at Gauthier's auberge are unmatched.)

"Gauthier had lots of energy, passion and skill. Many chefs have creative abilities, but what separates the good ones from the great ones is the energy behind that creativity," says Jim. "With his precision,



At 57, Jim Sampson is about to embark on a challenging new career in the restaurant business.

attention to detail and flair for creating something unique, Gauthier is one of those special people who has that creative-energetic combination that is a recipe for success."

At the end of the night, with the dishes cleared, the guests satiated and his Stratford training completed, Jim will strive for his own recipe for success. It is one that will blend an easy-going demeanour in the kitchen with the stamina of a long-distance runner.

They are distinct qualities but complementary, he says. "I've never related the two: cooking was a hobby and training for marathons keeps me in reasonably good shape. Like cooking, I started running later in life, but I got into it and it really grabbed hold of me because it's such a stress reliever."

The road work will no doubt serve his kitchen work well as he plans to grab hold of a new culinary spin on the traditions of Newfoundland cuisine. 📧

*Andrew Coppolino is a Kitchener, Ontario-based writer. With Mark Morton, he is author of Cooking with Shakespeare published in 2008.*