

Spending the day at cooking school

LIFESTYLES REPORTER HEATHER RIVERS RECENTLY JOINED SOME OF CANADA'S FINEST FOOD WRITERS AND SPENT THE DAY AT THE *STRATFORD CHEFS SCHOOL*

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I have always loved Stratford, but on a particularly frigid late-January day I am even more enamoured with this artistic and eclectic city.

As I parked my car next to recent snowdrifts in the Festival City, and trudged through the good-sized accumulations of the white stuff, I'm dreaming of the gastronomic delights that await me in the coming hours.

A few weeks ago, I was (what's a word that combines ecstatic, over the moon, joyous, anticipation?) invited to the *Stratford Chefs School* for their first-ever media day and the promises of two multi-course meals of haute cuisine prepared by top Canadian chefs.

I find out the reasoning behind the *Stratford Chefs School's* new focus on media relations is two-fold -- first, to promote the school's new reality television show entitled "Chef School" (it runs Tuesdays at 10 p.m. on the Food Network) and, secondly, to promote the chef school and its 25-year tradition of developing top-of-the-line chefs, so in demand by Canada's leading restaurants that they boast a 100 per cent employment rate.

No matter, with promises of a multi-course dinner with accompanying wine and a four-course luncheon (and of course more wine) and a crash-course in the art of culinary cookery beforehand -- I'm in.

After checking into my comfy, expansive loft in Bentley's Inn, I set off to find the media co-ordinator for the small group of food writers and journalists, including Canadian Living food editor Elizabeth Baird, who have gathered for the occasion.

From the lobby, we stride through the quiet streets of Stratford to Rundles Restaurant, located lakefront on Coburg Street, where we handed a glass of bubbly and given the VIP treatment.

Stratford Chefs School co-founders Jim Morris and Eleanor Kane are on hand to greet us and fill us in on both the school and the new show.

Morris is the owner of Rundles Restaurant and Kane is owner The Old Prune Restaurant, both of which were founded in 1977, and are currently home to the Stratford Chefs School.

In between the small talk, Morris and Kane speak with pride about the chef school, and the grueling schedule the student chefs follow to earn their elite credentials.

The Stratford Chefs School is the only culinary chef school in the country run by working restaurant professionals where students can spend up to 70 hours a week learning their trade.

Average applicants are in their mid-twenties and most already have some post-secondary education, but in recent years there have been fewer and fewer applicants.

"Enrolment has been a challenge for four or five years," Kane said. "Usually we have a wait list but that has changed dramatically."

Kane said the reality show has already increased interest in the school, with a number of inquiries and 20 actual applications.

"It puts us in a marketing position that we could never afford to be in," Kane said. "It's a very powerful medium."

Soon we are bundled up and sent on our way to the exquisite The Old Prune Restaurant, where my culinary dreams come true.

Luckily I'm seated next to James Chatto, the school's gastronomic writer in residence, and a Toronto Life and Food and Drink writer.

He's handy to have near when my rusty culinary tool-kit kicks-out, and is happy to offer explanations and answer questions pertaining to puzzling explanations of what I'm to eat.

On the menu is small, intense portions of kadaiff of pork with foie gras and leeks, lobster with buckthorn berry vinaigrette, rabbit

daube with shrimp bouillon, roast lamb loin with mushrooms and flavour-filled rutabaga finished off with maple syrup sabayon with pear compote, hazelnut biscuits and homemade vanilla ice cream.

Accompanied by wines from the Lailey Vineyard and prepared by visiting celebrity chef Yvan Lebrun, the meal comes close to perfection in its presentation, delivery and plain audacity.

"Each course is so flavour-intense," Kane said. "He doesn't back off."

Described as a man of few words, almost all of which I later find out are French, Lebrun and his wife Rolande Leclerc, are the owners of what is widely considered the best restaurant in Quebec City -- the Relais and Chateaux Initiale Restaurant.

Lebrun is one of several visiting chefs, which in recent weeks also included Jamie Kennedy, who have come to diffuse their culinary knowledge with the Stratford students and keep things exciting.

After a frothy decaf cappuccino, the group peacefully trundles back to the Inn, and a wine-induced slumber -- best to get some sleep when the next day calls for actual work.

After a quick breakfast and coffee the next morning, the group of us head to the Rundles Morris guesthouse, which is Morris's home in the winter and a guest house in the summer. At \$595 a night, it comes complete with its own chef.

It's difficult to find words to describe this light-infused, post-modern masterpiece, so go to www.rundlesrestaurant.com to see it for yourself.

In the large, well-equipped kitchen, Lebrun and his partner have been in the kitchen since 6 a.m. preparing for our visit.

We are greeted by our host Richard Maloney, 29, who is the innkeeper and chef at the Rundles Morris House.

As the group of writers tie on their aprons in preparation for their upcoming cookery experiences, Maloney offers this advice with a smile, "Remember Chef Lebrun is always right -- even if he's wrong, he's right."

The writers get to work, chopping, preparing, cracking, stuffing, folding and frying.

I stay in the background, occasionally chatting with Leclerc, who is as comfortable in the kitchen as she is at the front of the house.

Leclerc met Lebrun while they were both working at the Hilton Hotel in Quebec City.

Lebrun had immigrated to Canada from Brittany in France, before making his home in Quebec City. They opened Initiale in 1990.

"It's for people who want special and different," she said.

Despite my attempts to stay out of the way, eventually I'm called on to fold whip cream into a chocolate concoction.

While another writer happily slices baby bok choy, Lebrun makes chickpea French fries.

The kitchen has morphed into a comfortable chaos.

"It's a perfect example of too many chefs in the kitchen and not enough knowing what they're doing," jokes Andrew Coppolino, a freelance food writer for the Kitchener-Waterloo Record.

After a brief tour of the school, I get to speak to master of cuisine Neil Baxter -- he is the head chef at Rundles Restaurant and an instructor who appears on the reality show.

He said the initial 12 chef students were chosen from about 40 who attend the school through an interview process.

"There are some wild ones and some calm ones," Baxter said. "The show explains to the public the reality of someone attending chef school -- the amount of work, stress, strain and everything."

Baxter said he hopes the show will increase awareness about food culture in general and about the school itself.

Billed as part gastronomic finishing school and part boot camp, the show documents the chef students' trials and tribulations as they boil, bake and chop their way through their first year at the Stratford Chefs School.

"We run a unique program here," he said. "The school is a combination of two restaurants that function as separate restaurants in the summer."

Back in The Rundles Morris kitchen, lunch is served.

Instead of sitting at the beautifully appointed table in front, I choose a ringside seat in the kitchen, where I can watch the master perform up close.

On the menu today is lobster with shellfish bisque and aged Gouda, roast guinea fowl breast and for dessert, chocolate flan with the passtilla au chocolat, yes, my humble contribution to the meal.

After the last sip of the Cocchi Italian Barolo Chinato, a dessert wine paired up with the final course, it is time to say goodbye to this exciting, fantastical gastronomic world I have discovered and given the chance to catch a glimpse of for only a day. Sigh.