

School puts student chefs in the hot seat

By Dinah Murdoch

Believe it or not (and it's not too hard to believe), not every professional kitchen operates Gordon Ramsay-style. Yelling and swearing, though present in plenty of high stress cooking environments, are certainly not *de rigueur*.

Take the kitchen at Liaison College in Kitchener, for example.

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, a group of students is down to a half-hour before service of their three-course lunch and, as far as I can tell, no one is sweating bullets.

They're busy peeling carrots, meticulously slicing bread, rolling anchovies into little swirls, baking Parmesan crisps. A couple of students are sipping Tim Hortons coffee on the sly. Noses are to the grindstone, to be sure, but the atmosphere seems relatively relaxed.

Perhaps it's the tone set by today's "boss," Ernie, the student "chef of the day." Ernie's job has been to plan and execute a three-course lunch (with two choices for appetizers and mains) for family, friends, instructors — and anyone else who otherwise wants to eat a really lovely meal for very little money.

The "Chef of the Day" test is part of the program at Liaison College, a chef and culinary arts training facility. The Kitchener branch at King Street and Montgom-

ery Road (near Eastwood Collegiate) is one of 10 campuses across Ontario teaching students of all ages, whether they're looking to take recreational classes or to fulfil the in-class hours needed to eventually become a chef.

Anyone can partake in the meal, which takes place at the Liaison campus. It's one of the best deals in town, in fact. The three-course lunch, which happens every Wednesday at 12:30 p.m. (sometimes Fridays, too) costs a measly \$18.

On the particular day I went, I dined on caesar salad with creamy garlic dressing, lemon croutons and pancetta crisps; butter roasted halibut on an amazingly summery tasting panzanella salad (bread, tomatoes and basil); and lemon mousse and raspberry sorbet. All beautifully presented; all very tasty. Other weeks, it's been duck à l'orange; rack of lamb with grilled potato and goat cheese Napoleon; sautéed loin of venison. And, yes, under 20 bucks.

Sitting with Chef Dean Michielsen who, along with Chef Mike Magda, instructs the students, we chatted about some of his students' most memorable Chef of the Day meals.

"Some get very frightened," Michielsen says, recalling the time an ambulance had to be called when one in-the-hot-seat student had an anxiety attack. (Sounds like reality TV — maybe the Hell's Kitch-

en parallels are there after all.)

Then there was the St. Patty's Day theme meal where the budding chef who, like all students, was encouraged to get creative, decided to go against the teaching chefs' advice and serve a meal that included way too much meat.

And there was the student who tried to give a sense of urgency when giving orders in the kitchen but failed, resulting in what Michielsen recalls as a very long meal. "It was disastrous," he chuckles.

Ultimately, Michielsen says, it's a lot of fun to see the students' growth. "They get the nicks and cuts on their hands, and to have them come to the lunch from knowing nothing before is great," he says. "It gives them a bit of a sense of, 'Hey, maybe I could do that.'"

Indeed, on this day Ernie is pleased with how things go under his supervision.

"It was a cohesive unit in there," he says with a smile, post-meal. "No yelling or pan smacking!"

And I, having consumed three lovely courses for next to nothing, was feeling pretty good myself.

For more info on Liaison's Wednesday lunch program, check out the website at www.liaisonkitchener.ca or phone the school at 519-743-8335.

Dinah Murdoch is a Kitchener writer. You can contact her by email at dinahmurdoch@yahoo.com