



Cooking for a great cause

Fundraiser thrives for 25 years thanks to generosity of local chefs

BY ALEX BIELAK

Chef stereotypes are everywhere. Watch any reality TV show on the Food Network and you'll quickly get your fill of shouty egomaniacs and tattooed hipsters wolfing burgers bigger than their heads.

What is rarely portrayed is how generous and socially aware chefs are and how deeply ingrained teaching others is in their craft. In Waterloo Region this is especially evident through their remarkable collective support for youth-mentoring initiatives.

While many worthy events are supported by the culinary community, the one they most eagerly anticipate is the Chef's Gourmet Dinner, organized by the Best Friends of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Waterloo Region. This year the Friends group will celebrate raising more than \$1 million for Big Brothers Big Sisters, as well as marking the 25th iteration of the Chef's Gourmet Dinner, held at Bingeman's, a longtime supporter.

Mallory Boyer, resource development manager of Big Brothers Big Sisters, has

high praise for the Friends organization, which won the 2015 "Oktoberfest Woman of the Year" in the group category. Last year the chefs' dinner alone raised more than \$80,000 for seven youth mentoring programs, including one with a focus on refugees and newcomers. Boyer anticipates another sold-out event this year, pointing out the dedicated support is critical since the agency doesn't receive funding from government or the Big Brothers Big Sisters national office.

On April 10, after a night of appetizers,

a seven-course feast, and silent and live auctions, master of ceremonies Chef D will invite 20 local chefs to take a bow before the 325 guests. They, and their establishments, will have donated talent, time and all the food for the event.

Boyer is also effusive in complimenting the chefs. "Year after year we have more restaurants and chefs wanting to get involved with the event in some way, shape or form. It has even got to the point where multiple restaurants and chefs collaborate on one dish, because there are so many people that want to be involved, and we couldn't, unfortunately, have 20 courses!"

Chef Nick Benninger, co-owner of four Waterloo restaurants, and whose brother-in-law is himself a Big Brother, has helped with the gourmet dinner for 20 years. "The first restaurant I worked with was involved, and it was such a cool event for me at the time, as a kid, to get to meet so many other chefs... It was a great way to sort of network yourself, and see some other styles of food from other chefs, just the way they walked and talked."

There was a real sense of comradeship when several of the chefs gathered recently with two longtime members of the Friends group. Carolyn Dysart and Maureen Innes epitomize why Benninger so admires the group. "The passion these women have for this charity is hard to ignore, and it really taught me that I wanted to be part of it... (They) happen to be retired teachers, which makes it hard to say no to them. This is a cause that is not going anywhere. There's no cure."

The level of culinary horsepower required to pull off the gourmet dinner needs serious co-ordination. Benninger, and chef Dan McCowan of Red House restaurant have stepped up to fill that role. They have shaken things up, increasing communication and helping build new relationships among the chefs, and making the dinner modern, exciting and relevant. The result is a more balanced menu, with the additional benefit of more manageable time and financial commitments for those involved.

While Benninger is confident the 2017

Carolyn Dysart, Maureen Innes, Jaret Flannigan, Yvonne Zensner, Jeritt Raney, Dan McCowan, Nick Benninger

PHOTOGRAPHY • DWIGHT STORRING



Sotheby's
INTERNATIONAL REALTY
Canada
sothebysrealty.ca

324 KATHERINE ST. S. • \$1,099,000

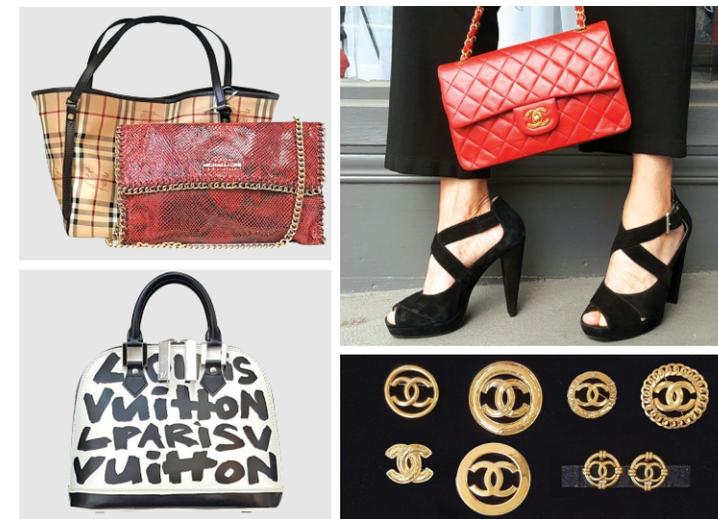
OUR PASSION IS UNLEASHING THE EXTRAORDINARY IN EVERY HOME WE TOUCH THROUGH EXCEPTIONAL SERVICE AND UNPRECEDENTED MARKETING

YOUR LOCAL REAL ESTATE EXPERTS

 <p>Julie Ashley SALES REPRESENTATIVE, M.S.W. c 519.841.1924 jashley@sothebysrealty.ca</p>	 <p>Albert Ashley SALES REPRESENTATIVE, B.A. c 519.716.1924 aashley@sothebysrealty.ca</p>	 <p>Sarah Rioux SALES REPRESENTATIVE, B.A. c 519.998.4295 srioux@sothebysrealty.ca</p>
---	--	---

Sotheby's International Realty Canada, Brokerage, Independently Owned and Operated. Not intended to solicit properties currently listed for sale. Sotheby's International Realty is a licensed trademark to Sotheby's International Realty Affiliates LLC. An Equal Opportunity Company.

LUXE TOUCH
DESIGNER CONSIGNMENT
Luxury • Contemporary • Vintage



Where authenticity is always guaranteed.

640 King St East Cambridge ON (Preston Town Centre)
519-212-6824 | www.luxetouchconsignment.com

How to solve your furniture problems



Not enough furniture?



Too much furniture?

New quality furniture and decor items arrive daily to help complete those empty rooms.
Most North American made
Save 15% - call for more information



Marge & Rita

Consign your excess furniture with us to earn 55% commission. We have buyers looking for high end furniture.
Delivery available - call for more information

Solving furniture problems for 35 years. Call or visit today and let us help you.

Bits & Pieces
Furniture & Décor Consignment Store

408 Gage Avenue (at Westmount), Kitchener
519-742-4033 [f](#) BitsandPiecesFurniture
info@bits-and-pieces.ca | www.bits-and-pieces.ca

6 ISSUES FOR JUST \$33.76



SUBSCRIBE NOW
therecordstore.ca

menu will be the best yet, McCowan – who first participated in the event about a decade ago – points out, “It’s not about us trying to show off our chef abilities as much as to cater to people who are supporting it, buying tickets and paying for the auction items: finding out what would be the best experience, and how us as chefs can all come together and execute that...”

“Nick has been great: we work very well together to lead the chefs to come together in a real team environment and effort.”

Jaret Flannigan, executive chef of Borealis Grille and Bar, has really loved volunteering with the event for the last five years. “It is a great opportunity and great cause, and a really big night of camaraderie,” he says. “No matter whether you are on first or last, everyone helps everyone else to plate, and then we go for drinks after. It is a really fun event.”

At 34, McCowan seems awfully young to have 20 years’ experience in the kitchen. With three elder brothers – one a Big Brother himself – who always looked out for his best interests, he appreciates the importance of this charity’s programs. “To be able to help out with people, it does feel very important for those who weren’t as fortunate to come from a close-knit family like myself,” he says.

In the kitchen, his key staff have been with him since they were teenagers. He laughs when he realizes three out of the five cooks currently employed in his kitchen worked for him 10 years ago at Del Dente in Kitchener. He sounds like a proud older brother, happy his sous-chef, Spencer Vella, will soon be leaving to start a new charcuterie enterprise. “I feel I’ve mentored him not only on how to work as a chef, but also how to be a business owner and leader, and he’s inspired to go and do his own thing,” McCowan says.

Both Benninger and McCowan are keen for Elvis Ellison, of Ellison’s Bistro in Kitchener, to receive credit. A chef for more than four decades, Ellison has contributed what he calls “little bites of the Caribbean” to the gourmet dinner for about 14 years. Giving others a helping hand is part of who he is.

“If you can help somebody to bring their



Carey McLellan



Elvis Ellison

“If you can help somebody to bring their dreams to reality, if you see somebody that needs to be mentored... it is basically just giving back a passing knowledge along.”

ELVIS ELLISON

dreams to reality, if you see somebody that needs to be mentored... it is basically just giving back and passing knowledge along,” Ellison says.

But he also participates in the annual event to mix with younger chefs. “I’m not saying I’m over the hill, but I like to see the interesting things the young guys are doing, and I like to learn,” he chuckles.

Having returned to Waterloo after six years away, Carey McLellan is the new chef at Timeless Café and Bakery, and the 2017 fundraiser will be her first time participating. She’ll be bringing her pastry chef with her, and apart from supporting the charity, she looks forward to having fun and meeting new people in the industry.

Lesley Brickman, co-owner of Timeless, says they’ve been happy to be involved with the event for three or four years now, ever since some of their clientele, members of the Friends organization, asked them to help. “The chefs have a great time and do a great thing for the community. They respect each other and get together and have fun. Carey will decide what we will contribute, and we donate the food. It’s also an opportunity for the servers to volunteer as well.”

Asked if she has ever been mentored by

someone special, McLellan finds her answer close to home. “Nick Benninger is kind of my idol as a chef, to be honest with you. My first in-the-kitchen job was with him at Benjamin’s (Restaurant and Inn in St. Jacobs), and I just watched him work, and the love he put into it. He worked in a small community with the local people, and just seeing what he does now – it’s impressive.” She says Benninger taught her “cooking is a passion and that school can’t really give you a passion. They can guide you and give you guidelines, but passion is in you if you have it. You can’t learn it.”

Benninger says he’s glad to see her back in the region and really happy to see her career come full circle. “There’s lots of young, energetic kids out there, but not all of them follow through all the way, so she’s done an awesome job. She thinks too kindly of me. I’m not sure I deserve it. Whatever mark I made on her stuck, I guess.”

It’s a great example of successful mentoring being at the heart of not just the local culinary community, but also the charity that brings them all together once a year. And it can all be summed up by Jeritt Raney, executive chef at Proof Restaurant, a self-professed man of few words. “It’s all about the kids.”

BIG STYLE

RED CORAL
LEVI'S OUTLET
ROCKPORT
SAMSONITE
TRENDS FOR MEN
TOOTSIES
SKECHERS
SPANNER
OXFORD MILLS
NATURALIZER
SAUCONY
LAURA



BIG SAVINGS

ROYAL DOULTON
PADERNO
CORNINGWARE
VIVAH JEWELRY
TOY BUILDING ZONE
NORTHERN REFLECTIONS
BABY'S ROOM WAREHOUSE
OLDE TYME KETTLE KITCHEN
COUNTRY BLUE
COTTON WAVE
REEBOK
CELL TECH

St. Jacobs Outlets



Open daily; weekday nights to 9 pm
Open holidays 25 Benjamin Road Waterloo

StJacobsOutlets.com