



Benton Leong serves up one of Les Marmitons' delicious dishes.

Camaraderie through food

Men's group, Les Marmitons, explores the fine art of cooking, from prep to plating

“Members must refrain from participating in any reprehensible behaviour, such as: excessive drinking of alcohol, loud or disturbing noise, displaying a lack of respect ...”

- LES MARMITONS RULES

BY JOHN ROE

PHOTOGRAPHY • TOMASZ ADAMSKI

It's late on a sunny September afternoon and as the last students straggle out of Conestoga College's Waterloo campus, the cars suddenly start pulling into the almost empty parking lot.

Twenty-one men of varied ages and backgrounds pour out of the vehicles and, with purposeful steps, stride through the doors and into a long, silent college corridor. Tucked under the arms of most of them are non-descript cloth cases filled with knives – lots of shiny, stainless steel knives with blades honed razor-thin and sharp enough to effortlessly shave the hair off your forearm.

The men and their knives are ready to work.

Nodding to one another or murmuring a few words of recognition, they make their way to a former classroom now converted into the college's Bloom restaurant. But these men have not just come to eat, they are here to cook, and unselfconsciously don the required uniform of their craft: immaculate white jackets, aprons and, in many instances, the floppy white toques that are the trademark of the experienced chef.

Before them are 10 tables draped in



Michael Kohlmaier stirs the pot during a Les Marmitons Waterloo Region gathering.



Among the hard-working team (top) gathered in the kitchen of Conestoga College's Bloom restaurant in Waterloo are Bill Spall (right), Ian Maclean (above right) and Lee Fitzgerald (below right).



spotless white cloths. These are the blank canvases for these culinary artists who belong to Waterloo Region's chapter of Les Marmitons. And they are ready to create.

Les Marmitons is an international gastronomic and social club for men who share a love of fine food, wine and the art of cooking. At regular gatherings, club members learn through doing how to prepare and present different kinds of fine cuisines under the watchful eye of a seasoned and recognized chef. Tonight, Eric Neaves, the executive chef at Kitchener's Fork and Cork Grill, will preside over 17 club members and their four guests.

While this tradition has deep roots in Europe, it wasn't until nearly 40 years ago that Swiss immigrants brought it across the Atlantic. The first North American chapter of Les Marmitons began in Montreal in 1977. Since then others have sprung up in 17 other communities in Canada and the United States.

Last year, Waterloo Region's club was formed, thanks to the efforts of co-founders Alex Bielak and Tom Motz. While living in Hamilton, Bielak, a food and drink writer, became involved in both the Toronto and Niagara chapters. But after moving to this region, he became convinced Les Marmitons had a future here.

A close friend of Bielak's for many years, Motz had developed a similar passion for food and restaurants, in large part, on family vacations to some of the finest dining establishments in Europe and the United States. Surely there were enough men like him in this region to make a Les Marmitons chapter succeed here, he thought.

Considering the attention paid to every aspect of food today – whether it is locally grown or organic, how it is prepared and displayed or how it is paired with wine – considering, too, that chefs have become international celebrities and that Waterloo Region is now home to some of Canada's finest restaurants, Bielak and Motz were right. The demand was here.

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Les Marmitons translates as “kitchen boys” or “chef’s helpers,” but the local meetings rise above any lowly titles. By the end of the evening, the members have created a fabulous feast – which they then enjoy.

It is a heterogeneous group of men who have answered their call: They range in age from 25 to 80. There is a lawyer, a baker, a butcher, a web designer, an accountant, a university chancellor, the owner of a lawn-maintenance company and many retirees.

Les Marmitons, by the way, is French for “kitchen boys” or “chef’s helpers.” But as Conestoga College president John Tibbits, one of this evening’s guests, observes: “It’s ironic they’re called (by this name). They’re not kitchen helpers, they’re the elites of society.”

However diverse their backgrounds may be, the club members are, to their core, gourmets or, in today’s vernacular, “foodies.”

“I’ve always liked eating,” explains Will Cullen, a 24-year-old software developer at Aeryon Labs who heard about the club through Bielak’s daughter and son-in-law. He reminisces as other members savour wines from California, France and Italy before getting down to work.

“I knew how to turn a stove on and make mac-and-cheese,” he says. “But I always had an interest in learning more.” As someone accustomed to working with the intricacies of new technology, he’s fascinated with “the detail aspect, and putting different pieces of work together.” And that’s what he will do tonight.

There is an undeniable air of formality surrounding the proceedings. The chapter’s rules and regulations remind members of the French word “comportment,” which refers to a person’s manner or bearing.

“Conducting of commercial business is deemed inappropriate at club events,” the rules state. Meanwhile, although wine is an essential part of every gathering, “Members must refrain from participating in any reprehensible behaviour, such as: excessive drinking of alcohol, loud or disturbing noise, displaying a lack of respect towards other members or guests.” In addition, imbibing wine in the kitchen is strictly forbidden.

Despite the precise rules and high

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expectations, there is nothing stuffy, snobby or pretentious about the evening. As the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle opined: “Through discipline comes freedom.” Perhaps that accounts for the gathering’s infectious and liberating feeling of goodwill. “You guys want to break out into your groups,” advises Paul Stefanson, one of the chapter’s founding members around 6 p.m., just before the cooking begins. “No sharp knives up in the air. Make sure everyone knows where you are. Don’t leave hot stoves on and always be cleaning your area. We don’t want any accidents. Nothing sharp stays out without being covered.” Leaving the restaurant, the men enter the adjoining commercial kitchen with its gleaming stainless steel stoves and tabletops. Tonight the 17 members work at four stations preparing four courses – bread, soup, main course and dessert. Each

station has a team leader. Chef Neaves is in command. “Remember,” Bielak says, “the chef is like the captain of a ship.” And the men happily comply. It is comfortably warm in the kitchen as the gas stoves are fired up and the ovens turned on. The aroma of fish, sausage, onions, peppers and corn soon blend into an aromatic mélange. At one station, and looking as much as a surgeon at an operating table as an aspiring chef, Kevin Stemmler, co-owner of Stemmler’s Meats and Cheese in Heidelberg, shows how to stuff a flayed pork loin with celery, onions, carrots, bread crumbs, chestnuts and sausage before stitching it up and neatly tying it off with a butcher’s knot. Nearby, charter member Benton Leong, of Golden Triangle Angel Network, which invests in new businesses, roasts the corn

that will go into the corn chowder soup. “We’re cooking and learning from each other,” he says. “It’s camaraderie through food. And you get amazing food.” The hours pass quickly. Soon it is 8:30 and suppertime. The men at each station plate their course and serve the others. Three Conestoga college students pour the wines. It is easier to itemize each of the menu’s courses than to describe how exquisite this banquet tastes. For the bread course there is focaccia bread, chicken liver mousse with crab apple jelly, baba ghanoush and a grilled vegetable spread. Soup is a corn and pickerel chowder with grilled-shrimp salsa and chili oil. The main course consists of the stuffed, roasted pork loin served with roasted brussels sprouts, green apple puree and apple-cider jus. On the side are sweet potato croquettes with poblano pesto.

The portions are satisfying but not excessive. The variety of taste sensations is enormous. Yet there is plenty of room left for the flour-less chocolate brownie with cocoa nib tuile, vanilla-plum sauce and red-wine soaked plums that make up the dessert offering. And what would a culinary marvel be without wine to wash it down? Bill Spall is the club’s sommelier as well as one of its founding members. “They knew I was in a wine club for some 30 years,” says the 72-year-old retired pension consultant. “I get the menus from the guest chef. I try to match up the food with the wines.” Most often, to supplement his own knowledge, Spall consults an expert at one of the local LCBOs. There is a poetry that comes with explaining the taste of a wine. For the first course a French Chardonnay, described as

having “stone fruit notes with some nutty undertone,” is served. “A dense, ruby wine with notes of black cherries and pepper” from the south of France accompanies the main course. For dessert, a 10-year-old tawny Port from Portugal with the “rich, classic aromas of walnuts, apricots and coffee beans” is poured into small glasses. We must all eat in order to live. At times like this, it is worth living in order to eat. And yet, there is another important side to Les Marmitons beyond satisfying their own taste buds and exploring their epicurean side. It’s about meeting the needs of others. As an outreach venture, the Waterloo Region chapter is providing annual scholarships worth \$1,000 for five years to help promising students in Conestoga’s culinary program and even more support is planned for the future. College president Tibbits is here tonight not only to enjoy a meal,

but also to gratefully accept a scholarship cheque. It’s nearly 11 when everything wraps up. There are leftovers to take home, along with thoughts and plans for next month’s menu at the same place and with most of the same dinner companions. But before leaving, the members are responsible for the kitchen cleanup. It has been an extraordinary banquet but its price is a relative bargain — \$80 for members who also pay annual dues of \$85. Perhaps, as they digest the evening’s events as well as its servings, some of the guests will want to join. The famous American cook, author and television celebrity Julia Child once declared: “People who love to eat are always the best people.” She would have no argument from those who attended September’s gathering of Les Marmitons. 

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