

Through Those Doors
For Stratford Chefs School: Class of 2026

Through those doors
you entered

most of you raw,
a few of you al dente,
apron strings attached
but not yet bound,
flavours undefined and resting
on expectant tongues,
knives encased
and eager for a honing.

Randi, Mike, Eli, Neil,
Conor and Melissa
Alex, Erin, Leah, Mark,
Christopher and Theresa

reviewed the novice recruits
with the scrutiny
of a shopping list,
the scrupulous dissection
of a new recipe:

are the ingredients here
for success,

can we tenderize and brine
these pieces into
a pureed whole,

produce from these sow's ears
the nuance and balance
of a tenderloin,

the emulsified perfection
of a finished chef?

And so the work began,
the *mise en place*

so *parfaitement en place*,
the knives unsheathed,
the burners turned to flame,

some of you requiring
a little simmer or a dredge,
others a severe deglaze or blanche,
a reduction here to bring
your talents out,
a chiffonade there
to lace an ego into ribbons,
a poke, a poach, a dice,
a braise, a whip, a sift,
a roux, a steep, a melt, a fold,
and sometimes a skewer
for those of you caught drifting
off in class, or the disgrace
of public spatchcock for those
showing up half-stewed.

But what a masterpiece
of culinary art has been produced,
the ten of you now,
the perfectly seasoned
harmonic melange
of experience and skill.

Antonio, Caden, Ciara,
Jon and Jenna
the sweet, the salty
and enticingly bitter,
Felix, Fidel, Sharon,
Rose and Lia,
the richness of sour
and that umami panacea.

You stand at the threshold
now of a world
anxious for your flavour.

You've learned how
to make butter sing,
how souffles rise like prayers
(and often on them),

how things get charred

and sometimes blister,
the true meaning
of the word “congeal,”
and not just as it
applies to food.

You’ve learned technique but
it is the nuance of your culinary
soul that will be your signature,
your blessing personalized
and sealed within each dish
you bring to table.

So go forth now
you culinary queens and kings,
you cultural cross-overs,
you grandiose gourmets
with your knives shining.

Go forth now
and show us all how
food connects,
how your talents
might bless our tables,
placate our palates and
make those aromatic choirs
sing upon the tongue.

Yes, through those doors
you entered,
but a different person leaves.
And in that leaving
there is a sadness, too.

Perhaps that hang-dog
balladeer, Leonard Cohen,
says it best,

“They’re stackin’ up the chairs now,
they’re wipin’ down the bar,
I never got to tell you
how beautiful you are.”

So let us not today
be guilty of that same

and grievous sin
of radiance unacknowledged.

Through those doors you entered
nervous buds about to bloom
and through those doors
you'll soon depart
a seasoned and most wondrous dish
for our nation to consume.

Yes, they're stackin' up the chairs now,
they're wipin' down the bar,
and we're all here to tell you
how beautiful you are.



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