

Meet Your Iron Chefs: Grant Robertson of Aw, Shucks!



By Brock Weir

Last year, Grant Robertson, the head chef at Aw, Shucks set out to show off his love of local, fresh ingredients, as part of Iron Chef Aurora 2013.

Using the secret ingredients of asparagus and beer, he cooked up a dish centred on perch with the asparagus, and another featuring roast quail and beer.

This year, as he prepares to do battle in Kitchen Stadium once again, facing off for the second year running with last year's victors at Orchid Thai, and some new kids on the block, Mr. Robertson is staying true to his fresh and local philosophy.

‘Last year was a lot of fun being able to see what other restaurants were doing and how every chef involved was creating in their own right different dishes out of the secret ingredients,’ he says. ‘Because asparagus is in season now, I use asparagus on the menu and use that whether it was in Iron Chef or not. I don’t look at it as much as a competition, but showcasing the skills you have and going out, having a good time and supporting charities.’

This year, Iron Chef Aurora will benefit the Aurora Food Pantry and although The Auroran has been sworn to secrecy about the secret ingredients, if they were questions on Jeopardy, they might be found under the headings of ‘Herbs’ and ‘Potent Potables.’

Ahead of the competition, one of the ingredients gives Mr. Robertson ideas tied to East Asian cuisine, while the other harkens back to the traditional meals of Italy. He is familiar with both ingredients and eager to give them a whirl.

‘I am game for anything,’ he says. ‘I like the thrill of going through and researching the history of the ingredients, where it is grown, what is traditionally made with it, and I write my own interpretations of that. It informs [what I cook] to a point, but you also have to be creative on your own. You can’t go out and do something that has been done before.’

‘I am trying to use the secret ingredients multiple times within the dish and create different layers and different aspects of what the ingredients are and how you can pull out the different flavour profiles for one ingredient.’

The year since 2013’s Iron Chef Aurora has been an eventful one for Mr. Robertson. Since then, Aw, Shucks has moved from its previous location on Yonge Street near Aurora Heights Drive, to their new location just south of Yonge and Wellington that is nearly triple their previous size.

The new environment has also given him new room for creativity, but he is sticking close to his roots and looking forward to putting his locavore beliefs into practice, heading out into nature this weekend to collect his own fiddleheads and wild leeks for upcoming dishes.

Fiddleheads are only in season for about a week and a half, locally, so you have to go out and pick them as soon as you can, he says. You can find them at Farmers' Markets, but it is nice to go out into the forest and pick them as soon as you can. They taste like spring; almost a cross between asparagus and a green bean, and there is a little earthiness in them because they do come from the forest.

One advantage of doing Iron Chef this year is the learning curve. You have to be ready for anything and make sure you are prepared. You want to make sure your dishes are not too similar to anyone else's and you want to stand out and not be grouped with anyone else.