

Meet your Iron Chefs: Rob Lizotte



By Brock Weir

As he stood at his grandmother's side rolling out pastry, putting it into a tin and filling it up with all the good stuff that makes a pie a pie, there was little indication at the time that with every stroke of the rolling pin was one more stroke towards a passion and a career.

But that is exactly what happened to Rob Lizotte, chef at Edward Street Market Bistro, when at the age of five, he helped his grandmother make dessert.

It is his earliest food memory and through his self-described cooking style of "rustic refined", he hopes to conjure up similar memories in those who sample his food.

"I like to do simple things, nothing too complicated or complex when you actually become disconnected with the food," he says. "[In my cooking] everyone identifies what the food is and brings back those memories of when you're sitting with your family and having amazing lasagna that your aunt made and, 10 years later, you're having a lasagna and those memories come back. Those connections are where I think food has its greatest impact."

Mr. Lizotte is one of five local chefs preparing to face off this Thursday as the Aurora Community Centre is transformed into kitchen stadium for the first Iron Chef Aurora. The competition was developed by Debbie McGrath and Tim Newnham of Habachat, a local social media company, as a way to highlight everything that local restaurants have to offer, all the while raising significant amounts of money for local charities. Mr. Lizotte is paired with Haddan Eby Endowment Fund which supports Camp Ooch, a camp for children with cancer.

Each chef is tasked with creating a menu incorporating the same two secret ingredients and the winner will be chosen by those in the audience. Beyond the Thursday event into the weekend, the Community Centre will continue to be a destination for Aurora foodies as the Taste of Aurora festival runs through the weekend.

"It is great to show the residents of Aurora there is great food north of the city and we have great chefs who have lots of passion," says Mr. Lizotte. "I have worked in Aurora and the community for about 10 years, so I have noticed a slow change that retailers are starting to offer more variety and more of a range of products [to show] quality goes beyond the city. This is just a further extension to get us to that point."

From the early days cooking with the family matriarch, it was soon clear cooking was what Mr. Lizotte wanted to do with his life.

She showed him the importance of cooking things properly for a family, but also that cooking goes beyond the actual act of preparing food. It is the whole experience, he says, of sharing it with others and having people share in the experience together fuels the passion to get to the next level.

‘I got into the profession not by choice, but it chose me,’ he says. ‘When you’re passionate about something and you have that kind of an interest and drive, it is sort of a natural path to take.’

He first honed his craft through high school with part time jobs, but sampled other professions while at university, but nothing but cooking seemed to click.

‘When you get up and go to work and it is not a grudge, you know you’re on the right path.’

Since that time, he has also seen the collective palates of the community evolve as the cooking market evolves with continuing influences from sources such as Food Network, which has exploded in recent year. With this development, more international flavours and ingredients are more readily available and becoming standards. Ontario is also blessed, he said, with diversity, and this is reflected through cooking.

‘I think people expect far more eclectic ingredients and more variety in their food and where they get their food from,’ he says. ‘They have more knowledge of food now and they have more expectations. Before there was a bit of smoke and mirrors when it comes to cooking.’

What Mr. Lizotte will have to offer at Iron Chef Aurora this week, he says, will be, however, a bit of a step back to the simpler fundamentals of cooking.

‘I am focusing on the spring: light, nothing too healthy, but also freshness and a little health conscious,’ he says. ‘That means fresh ingredients put together really well that speak to the person who is enjoying it.’