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DEEPTI BABU

Kids in the Hall Bistro: a restaurant with a cause

WHEN I FIRST CAME TO EDMONTON AND HEARD ABOUT THE KIDS IN THE HALL, I ASSUMED IT WAS A REFERENCE TO THE SKETCH COMEDY TELEVISION SHOW THAT HAD ME AND MY FRIENDS “CRUSHING YOUR HEAD” IN OUR SCHOOL’S HALLWAYS. LITTLE DID I KNOW THAT TO EDMONTONIANS FAR MORE CULTURALLY SAVVY THAN ME, THE NAME HAS A STRIKINGLY DIFFERENT SIGNIFICANCE.

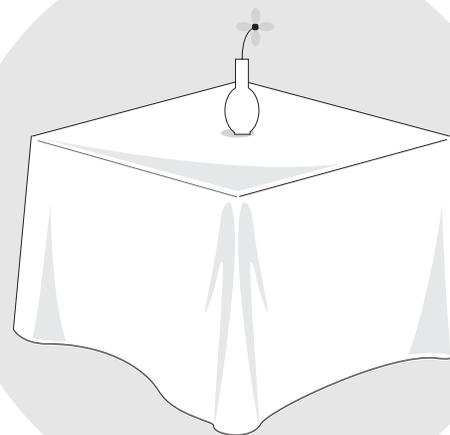
The Kids in the Hall Bistro began nearly ten years ago with federal funding and the goal of helping at-risk youth. Its success can be attributed not only to its remarkable staff, but also to the delectable culinary items it offers. I sat down with manager Calvin Avery to learn about the origins of this innovative program – while a baker’s rack of freshly baked muffins as big as my head practically begged me to sample them.

The Bistro offers full breakfast, lunch, and catering services with one major difference: the majority of the staff are youth at risk. They are referred to the program through the criminal justice system, children’s services system, and by word of mouth. On acceptance, the first steps are life skills workshops. Not every youth who completes the workshops goes to the restaurant; those who are interested make an application to spend up to nine months working full-time at the Bistro.

Many have no experience or interest in the food industry, but are given a crash course – from the moment they enter the program to the day they graduate. Working in a busy restaurant environment teaches the kids practical career skills, safely within the confines of the program. Though a small proportion of the youth return to their troubled pasts, the majority of graduates are working in jobs or are on a clear path to one.

The program nearly closed in December 2004 because of funding problems. It is now supported by provincial funding, corporate sponsors and private donors. “The Edmonton community has been fantastic, but we also need to be more self-reliant in the future,” says Calvin.

The sounds of lunch being prepared were distracting me. I was able to sneak a few minutes with Darcy Torpe, the Bistro’s head chef, before the rush truly began. He came to the Bistro seven years ago from the Fairmont Hotel Macdonald, after having completed a culinary arts degree several years before. Darcy runs the kitchen with only one sous chef



and a catering chef, the latter a graduate of the program.

Darcy maintains that only about twenty percent of his time is actually spent in the kitchen, with the rest of it focused on the kids and their needs. He has the challenge of helping them while maintaining high-quality products for customers.

The Bistro tries to make the practical aspects of the restaurant reflect the real world. Youth are paid seven dollars an hour for a six-hour shift, during which they receive standard breaks and discounted meals if they choose to eat at the restaurant. Tips are evenly split between the day’s staff, but only those who have arrived on time, returned from breaks on time and completed a full shift are eligible.

A scan of the lunchtime menu revealed numerous contemporary options; soups, salads and sandwiches and wraps – grilled chicken panini, a tasty club with pesto mayonnaise and the staff’s favourite Kids in the Hall Burger – with cheddar cheese, bacon and mushrooms. Entrées include wild salmon, pork rack with ratatouille and chive pancake, and a house-made fruit crumble for dessert.

Darcy quickly solved my problem of what to choose by mentioning that the Thai salad – mesclun greens, barbecued pork and prawns with toasted cashews – is a hot seller, no matter what the season. And with good reason: the citrusy tang of the mandarins provided contrast to the savoury spice of the cilantro-soy dressing, while the cashew and fresh ginger bits produced a lovely crunch.

Waking me from my salad reverie was Tyler, a youth from the program. He has been at the Bistro for a couple of months, but already knows he wants to be a chef after he graduates. He patiently answered my questions, all very politely and seriously. Tyler told me that the program was fun and he was enjoying his time there: “I like I look back and think, how did I do that?”

When asked what his favourite dish to prepare is, Tyler quickly responded with “chicken a la king,” a pasta dish. Finally cracking a smile, he added, “I like to garnish it and put the finishing touches on the plate. The presentation is important.”

Now that is a kid after my own heart. All I could do was grin and nod in agreement. ☺

Deepti Babu is a genetic counsellor who hopes to find the gene for gastronomic passion one day. Her family is living proof that it exists.