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The 2008
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HEAD OF THE CLASS

George Brown College unveils its
revamped hospitality school

Dean John
Walker (left)
and Chef John
Higgins of
George Brown
College

By Alistair Kyte // Photography by May Truong

School Is In

After years of planning, fundraising and construction, George Brown College unveils its renovated and reinvigorated hospitality school

As citizens and public officials wade through the highly charged political and socio-economic maelstrom that currently grips the U.S., transparency has never been more vital. It implies the lines of communication are always open between the public and the state. It tears down walls and fosters interaction between insiders and the peripheral masses. At its very core, transparency means being accountable and exhibiting an openness and willingness to change.

It's also the dominant theme of the new \$20 million Centre for Hospitality and Culinary Arts at George Brown College in downtown Toronto. After years of planning, fundraising and construction, the new facility has welcomed its first cohort of students, and it's inviting everyone and anyone else to come and take a peek.

Gazing across Adelaide Street at the gleaming, multi-hued glass façade, chef John Higgins, director of the George Brown Chef School, wells with pride. "When you look at this building from across the road at night, it's incredible," he says. "A big goal of the

team that put this together was they wanted the glass structure to be transparent. They wanted everyone to be able to see inside — there are no secrets anymore. Anyone can look right into the kitchens and see what students are doing."

But it's not just about the transparent structure of the new school (passing pedestrians can actually look inside the new Garland-equipped culinary labs and watch the next generation of great chefs learn how to julienne a squash), it's about how open the school's management team was with industry partners as it formulated a strategy to revamp dated curriculum

TWIN BILLING: John Walker (left) and John Higgins, standing in the open kitchen at the Chefs' House, spent years planning and overseeing the renovation and expansion of the hospitality school at George Brown College.

and bring its programs into the modern era. Early in the planning stages, an independent agency was hired to interview 40 hospitality industry companies to determine the best way to improve the school. Planning doesn't get more transparent than that.

"Interacting with industry was part of the mandate," says John Walker, dean of the Centre for Hospitality and Culinary Arts, over the phone from the renovated school. "We also took a group of our faculty out and introduced them to chefs in the city. Our goal was, 'How do we make these programs market-related?'"

At the root of the strategy is a desire to have a school that graduates the best, most prepared hospitality students possible. Thankfully, they're starting from a position of strength — this year 1,500 new students were whittled down from 6,500 applicants. "The quality of grads we turn out is critical," says Walker, who's been slowly implementing his vision for the hospitality programs at the school since he became dean in 2000. But he's also cognizant of the fact this process was truly a team partnership, adding without the determined effort of his instructors and the industry, the renovation, expansion and improvements to



Raising the Bar

A few years back when preparations for the renovation and expansion of the Centre for Hospitality & Culinary Arts were being made, dean John Walker understood it would never happen without significant contributions from the foodservice industry. So he targeted a goal of \$5 million to be raised, and today he's happy to report that goal has almost been met.

"We're still running the Yes Chef! fundraising campaign, and we're up to \$3.4 million so far," says Walker. "We've had terrific uptake, and we've had some very exciting partnerships evolve out of those fundraising efforts. There is still \$1.6 million to go, and I'm confident with a well-executed strategy, we can close on that deal."

Chef John Higgins, director of the George Brown Chef School, agrees. "The major players have definitely come to the table, from Unilever to Garland to Ecolab, which has been great."

But nobody had to twist their arms – helping out hospitality schools is just smart business. In a way, it's an investment in their own businesses, helping to educate the people who may work for them one day. "The industry has been very proactive," says Higgins. "We now have great partnerships with these companies."



programming would have been impossible to realize. "The faculty and staff have been a major part of the school's transformation," he affirms.

Chef Higgins, who packs a lifetime of experience cooking in restaurants and hotels around the world, personally reached out to top toques in the city to ask their thoughts on improving the school. Not surprisingly, that group included former George Brown graduates, many who are now setting culinary trends in the city.

"It's not that George Brown graduates were coming to me unprepared, but the programs were a bit dated," says Ted Corrado, chef de cuisine of c5 at the Royal Ontario Museum, and a GBC grad. "That's what Chef Higgins was focusing on when he came to visit me [at c5]. He wanted to know where things were at right now in the restaurant world. He said, 'You guys need to tell me what you want to see from graduates, and we can work to produce that.'"

So when Corrado explained what traits he values most in young cooks, Higgins listened. They exchanged ideas about the current state of the restaurant industry, the new methods and equipment that are in vogue, and what young cooks are expected to be able to do. "If they can cook, if they can get a stock on, that's great, but if they really want to be a chef, there's so much more to know, stuff that can only be learned by getting your hands dirty and doing it every day," Corrado says. "That repetition only comes from being in a real kitchen. That's what chef Higgins wants to focus on."

Higgins also recognizes his graduating students have more opportunity than ever before. The current labour

squeeze threatens to leave Canada's hospitality industry needing 300,000 additional workers by the year 2015. "Gone are the days when students leave school and it's only hotels and restaurants they'll work in. There are great opportunities in many different fields, like F&B at the Air Canada Centre or the Rogers Centre, or working at companies such as Unilever or Sobeys." Higgins vows it's no longer a cookie-cutter program, and they aren't producing cookie-cutter students.

Central to that endeavour is the Chefs' House restaurant, the new \$2 million centerpiece of the school's renovation and expansion project. Walking along King Street, the first thing that pops out about the building are its tall, transparent windows. When streetcars trundle along the busy street, they get a great glimpse of serious students at work in the open kitchen, which is front and centre at the Chefs' House. Multiple flat-screen TVs are mounted on walls, usually broadcasting the *Iron Chef*-style action in the chaotic kitchen. One TV even faces the street so passersby can watch the chefs-in-training braise a lamb shank or drizzle heirloom tomatoes with house-made balsamic vinaigrette. Everything's out in the open, inviting interaction between students and customers. There's no need to wait for the curtain to drop — there simply isn't one.

"The goal here is not just about fancy food, china and all the thrills and spills of a restaurant," says Higgins. "This is about the service, food and the culture, the interaction, wine and the education. It's a learning lab — it's almost like a micro-organism that's ready to sprout, just like when you're making bread."

If the Chefs' House and its students are micro-organisms about to morph, then Higgins is the master baker. This morning, he appears in the restaurant right as chef de cuisine Paul Silva is explaining the day's dishes to the 20 or so student-servers in "class." The plates are lined up along the front banquette of the kitchen, and Higgins immediately begins inspecting the food and observing the instruction. It seems the sweet potato fries are not up to his standard, something that will need attention later. He walks





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around the restaurant and the students’ eyes light up, exchanging hellos, shaking hands, and even stopping to give advice to one young lady on the merits of a proper handshake. “That’s better,” he quips at her second, more determined effort. “Now you’ll get the job.”

One thing that’s clear about the Chefs’ House is the goal is not just to teach students, but to educate the public as well. “The great thing about it is customers can see exactly how a kitchen works,” says Higgins. “Most people have no idea how a kitchen works.” The school has pulled down the walls between itself and the community even further by launching a series of interactive “Urban Living Workshops,” where the public is invited to enjoy a weekend of instruction at the new restaurant and school.

But regardless of its openness to the public — educating students is still the priority at the Chefs’ House. During lunch service, instructors watch and grade everyone intently, ensuring service excellence is one lesson that’s infused in each student like a saffron-flavoured risotto. “When we were doing interviews about setting this up two years ago, hotel chains, restaurants and industry leaders said we needed to teach more service leadership,” says Walker. “If you speak to industry leaders, they’ll say service leadership is about authenticity. We’re spending time with our students, developing that authenticity in service, along with some of the other traditional approaches. But it’s the authenticity that’s going to help them succeed in industry.”

Chefs in training are also exposed to first-rate instruction. Early in September, a baker from Germany who was attending Michael Stadtländer’s Canadian Chefs’ Congress (where Higgins and a team of George Brown students prepared breakfast on open fires for

hundreds of bleary-eyed attendees in the middle of a farmer’s field) dropped in to do a bread demo. “This is something students would never have seen in the past,” says Higgins. Ten or 15 of them learned how to make the breads and then they sold the finished product at the restaurant for lunch and dinner.

Looking to the future, Higgins is confident the combination of the school’s history, in addition to its improvements, perfectly positions George Brown. “It’s like an improved recipe. There are challenges when you are growing in academia, and change is never easy, but it’s good,” he says. “We want the Chefs’ House to be the centre of culinary integrity and culinary knowledge in Canada.”

To that end, he and Dean Walker are diligently working to launch a new guest-chef series, signing a partnership with the Ontario Hospitality Institute to help make it happen. “It’s going to be very similar to the James Beard Foundation,” says Walker, of the program where visiting chefs will be invited to cook extravagant meals at the Chefs’ House. “We’re going to celebrate Canada’s best with our students, and also students at other colleges. This is inclusive, we’re going to be asking them to come and join us in this celebration.”

As part of Walker’s vision, he’s trademarked the Canadian Hospitality Walk of Fame as a way to celebrate Canada’s best with the school and the Toronto community. When it’s all said and done, he hopes it will become a tourist destination for the city. That’s a lofty goal, but with all the hard work that’s gone into improving the school, there’s no plan to start lowering expectations now.

“It was time for a facelift, and I’m really excited they got one,” says c5’s Corrado. “The whole city is going to benefit from it — the program will produce better quality students, and therefore, better cooks. In the end, that means a healthier industry.” ●

