

# PERFECTION IS IMPOSSIBLE EXCELLENCE IS NOT

## CELEB CHEF ROB FEENIE SHARES HIS MANTRA WITH STUDENTS AS THE FIRST-EVER HOKANSON CHEF IN RESIDENCE.

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"Each one of you is responsible for your course, but I'm here to support you," says Canadian culinary superstar Rob Feenie, slowing his usual rapid-fire chefspeak to a mere gallop. He's addressing a gathering of lucky and nervous 20-something Culinary Arts students in their crisp white chef jackets, gathered around a kitchen island prep station. With just over one hour to go before lunch, Feenie runs through the menu with military precision – portion sizes, cooking temperatures and plating instructions.

The eight-minute "preshift" is part game-plan review, part pep talk. The students are about to cook a three-course lunch for 90-some Edmonton restaurant pros, media and other invitees. The lunch is part of a three-day chock-a-block schedule set out for Feenie as NAIT's inaugural Hokanson Chef in Residence – a program designed to provide opportunities for students to learn from some of the best chefs in the world. He's already presided over three master class demonstrations for hundreds of eager student chefs, question and answer sessions, receptions, a dinner and a stream of interviews with local and national media. The lesson right now? A glimpse into the pressure and passion of cooking at the highest level. This isn't a classroom scenario. The over 90 hungry guests who will soon fill Ernest's dining room are the real deal.

"It'll be intense," Feenie warns. "I won't yell and scream at you. I'm not that kind of chef," he reassures, knowing that the alpha-male antics of chef Gordon Ramsay might be on their minds. "But I will say so if I see something that I don't like." Then, to end on a lighter note, he adds, "This is your show, you are responsible for your dish but I'm your wingman. That's how a kitchen works."

Having a chef of Feenie's calibre as a wingman is like winning the culinary lottery. Feenie, 44, has worked in a three-star Michelin restaurant in France and with the biggest-name chefs in the United States. Determined to shine the light on his home turf, Feenie opened his own restaurant, Lumière, in Vancouver in 1995, at the age of 29. Five years later, Lumière became the first freestanding restaurant in Canada to achieve the globally recognized Relais Gourmand designation and later the Traditions et Qualité: Les Grands Tables du Monde seal of approval. (Only a handful of restaurants in Canada have the former, Lumière is the only one to have the latter.) In 2002, he expanded with Lumière Tasting Bar, and, in 2004, Feenie's. During this time, he hosted six seasons of *New Classics with Rob Feenie* on Food Network Canada and authored three cookbooks (he is now writing a fourth).

Despite his impressive list of hard-won accolades, even Feenie admits his farthest-reaching accomplishment occurred in just one surreal hour. While about six million TV viewers looked on, Feenie bested uber-Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto in 2005 on an episode of *Iron Chef America*. "The victory wasn't so much about me winning," says Feenie, grinning widely (chefs are competitive animals). "It was about showing that we have great talent in this country."



Chef Rob Feenie gives Culinary Arts students a glimpse into the pressure and passion of cooking at the highest level.



## FEENIE'S SUCCESS IS THE RESULT OF DECADES OF LONG, UNGLAMOROUS HOURS SPENT LEARNING AND HONING HIS CRAFT.

Feenie's star-studded Rolodex also catches the students' attention. He's cooked for Sting and friends on the singer's yacht. Bill Clinton thinks he's a good golfer. And he hangs out with pro hockey players and the likes of Michael Bublé. But, Feenie makes clear, this is the result of decades of long, unglamorous hours spent learning and honing his craft.

"Perfection is impossible, but excellence isn't. If you aim for perfection, then, at the very least, you'll achieve excellence. If you only aim for excellence, then you might only reach good." Feenie repeats this several times over his three days at NAIT. Over and over, he talks about balancing the confidence needed to compete with the best in the world with the openness needed to learn and take criticism constructively.

Kimberly Farrugia, 19, listens intently to the advice. This second-year Culinary Arts

student hopes to own a pastry shop one day. "It's like he's giving us a heads-up on some of the experiences and pitfalls we will go through."

Feenie speaks frankly with the students about his own very public personal "kitchen nightmare" when, in 2007, he was forced to walk away from his award-winning restaurants after a dispute with his business partners proved unresolvable.

He also talks about the radical career shift he embarked on in 2008 when he became food concept architect for the B.C.-based Cactus Club Café restaurant chain. Feenie sets the culinary vision for the entire company, says Christy Wilson, director of marketing for the casual fine-dining chain. "He sets the direction, the tone, the look, the feel (local, fresh, organic when possible). In addition, he

Above, Rob Feenie works with students in one of the state-of-the-art kitchens in the Hokanson Centre for Culinary Arts. Right, seared scallop.

writes all his own recipes, trains the regional chefs and mentors our chefs at all levels." For him, it's another trail to blaze: how to reinvent and elevate this segment of the restaurant landscape.

The breadth and depth of his career means Feenie can speak to the different paths the culinary grads might consider, making him an obvious choice. "The long list of names for NAIT's first chef in residence became the short list, and then chef Feenie's name floated to the top quite quickly," explains Perry Michetti, associate dean of the School of Hospitality and Culinary Arts.

For John Hokanson, who, together with his wife Susan, has been a longtime benefactor of NAIT's culinary programs and whose \$1-million endowment created the chef in residence program, the real success of Feenie's visit was to see "how excited the students



were and what a fine job these students do" at functions such as the lunch.

Indeed, the students rise to the occasion. All three courses - the delicate scallop carpaccio, the crispy pan-seared salmon with green pea risotto and red wine sauce, and the simply seductive white chocolate crème brûlée - get rave reviews from the guests. A bit of culinary magic was created in the NAIT kitchen, and it may be awhile before these students have another opportunity to cook with a chef of this stature. After all, Feenie has made a career out of being a tough act to follow. ■