

Culinary Passion

Even a crippling injury can't keep chef Pascal Ribreau out of his own kitchen

It's that crisp and mellow time of year when summer yields to the approach of fall, and chef Pascal Ribreau is apparently invigorated by a recent visit to his native France. His restaurant, Célestin, is a successful upscale Toronto bistro whose appetizers, *Toronto Life* reports, "set a lofty standard," while its mains are praised by Alan Vernon and Don Douloff of Toronto.com as "tantamount to poetry on a plate."

Ribreau enthusiastically outlines recent developments: he opened a new patio in midsummer, he says, "and it's been incredible since then, even with the bad weather that we've had." The restaurant décor has been refreshed, and "we did a big change in the menu," he continues. "We opened a café at lunch, and the Saturday and Sunday brunch is a huge success, without any media coverage. We're busier than we've ever been."

Since noticing Célestin at the top of a restaurant survey in the category of "Neighbourhood Gems," Ribreau has also begun to rethink his menu and pricing structure. "It's still fine dining," he assures. "But now they can just drop by and order a glass of Pinot at the bar and maybe one or two appetizers; it's a lot more neighbourhood-friendly."

However, his philosophy of cuisine has not changed. If anything, his trip to France's Massif Central and the food-lover's paradise of Provence has strengthened his faith in the style of cooking he loves. "It just reaffirms my belief in Southern French cooking; it

reasserts my conviction in what I'm doing here; you can do French cooking without cooking heavy food," he says.

Ribreau's passion for cooking is clearly a powerful driving force. So powerful, in fact, that it has pulled him inexorably, even painfully, past obstacles that would literally have immobilized anyone of less conviction and dedication to his calling. In fact, to hear him talk about his plans for Célestin, one would never imagine that Pascal Ribreau has spent the past nine years paralyzed from the chest down.

As a child in France, Ribreau was close to his grandfather, whom he would often visit in the mountains of the Auvergne, and after whom Célestin is named. He attended culinary school and apprenticed at the Palais de Luxembourg and Relais de Sèvres in Paris. At 18, he met his wife, Canadian Laurie Anderson, and returned with her to Toronto, where his first job was as a pastry cook at the Fairmont Royal York. In 1989, he became chef de partie at the Sutton Place; he returned to France for two summers to work at Restaurant Hôtel Les Roches Le Lavandou before moving to Montreal to open the popular Allumette on St. Denis Street.

At age 28, Ribreau returned to Toronto as executive chef for the Cabbagetown restaurant Provence. His future must have seemed certain. But just two years later, he and his wife spent the Thanksgiving of 1999 in Quebec. They were both sitting in the back seat of a car with another couple and their friends' two-year-old daughter



when a driver in the oncoming lane miscalculated a passing manoeuvre. The car carrying Ribreau rolled in the ditch. When it came to rest, everyone else had suffered only minor injuries, but Ribreau, who had been thrown out the rear window, had a broken spine that left him what is technically known as a "T8 paraplegic," with movement only from the chest up.

Despite considerable pain, Ribreau quickly decided he would not give up his intended course of life. "Ten weeks after I broke my back, I took some leg braces and started walking on some parallel bars, and when I realized I could stand, I realized I could work," he says.

He pushed himself to prepare a Christmas feast that year. "I really wanted to cook for my friends and

family for Christmas dinner. It was really tough." But each victory bolstered his resolve to push himself harder. He undertook a grueling program of rehabilitation, and his colleagues at Provence worked with him to find ingenious solutions to allow him to work again.

Today, Ribreau uses a standard wheelchair at home, and is able to drive with a specially adapted car. In the kitchen at Célestin, he manoeuvres with a specialized wheelchair designed by Toronto engineers Motion Specialties that allows him to navigate in a standing position with the help of a joystick. "We had everything from robot specialists to electronics and other software people. We put a whole team together and we built this chair in 18 months," he says.

On New Year's Eve 2002, Ribreau challenged himself in yet another way, by opening his own restaurant again. After all, he quips, "it's crazy to have a restaurant even if you're able-bodied."



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But the success of Célestin, like Ribreau's other accomplishments, is a testament to his dedication and driving passion.

Clearly, few people could spring back into the kitchen from such a disabling setback, as even Ribreau admits. "I don't want to shatter anybody's dream," he says. "For me, I love physical work. If I don't work hard, I don't feel complete in my day." Apart from his demanding work, Ribreau also participates in cross-country wheelchair marathons to raise money for disability causes.

"I realize that this is exhausting, and I realize it's not for everybody," he says. But his example shows what people with disabilities — even severe ones — can achieve in the industry. Ribreau praises Canada as "open-minded" in this area, saying Europe is "not that way" yet. He also says restaurants may be missing out on business from patrons with disabilities for simple reasons like failing to mention on websites and in advertising they are wheelchair



accessible. The hospitality industry also has a role to play in lobbying for good municipal snow removal and similar practical measures.

As Canadians age, "It's a huge portion of our society that has to be

accommodated," says Ribreau. "I think it's important for people to realize they can also be a part of our businesses."

Chef Paul Ribreau's life story is told more fully in Paula Todd's book, *A Quiet Courage* (Thomas Allen Publishers, 2004). ■

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