

So it's all about local for me – local pride and local product – local people.

Bernard Casavant C.C.C., Culinary Manager

Okanagan College.¹

Mike Evans (ME): Could you tell us something about this organization and your role here?

Bernard Casavant (BC): Okanagan College Culinary Campus is the source for all the culinary training in the Okanagan. Our affiliated property is Thompson Rivers University. They are another campus in the Okanagan, they're not a sister campus. We have a Vernon Campus, but there's no culinary training there. So in the central Okanagan, we tend to have the biggest student population. We offer Cook's Apprenticeship entry levels. We have Professional Cook (PC) 1, 2, and 3. We have certified instructors for the Industry Training Authority (ITA), so we can do different challenge levels here set up with our regional government's collaboration with ITA. We also launched, last year, a Pastry Arts Diploma program which is a ten-month curriculum and we're into our second intake which just started yesterday. We have seventeen students in that, so it's pretty cool to see that starting to grow. I think we run through around 250 students in a normal year, in the kitchens here, between all the multiple different levels and for different intakes. Then we have sommelier

¹ Interviewed by Mike Evans, Sept 2014 in Kelowna BC. Please note, this interview has been edited for length and continuity, and should not be taken as a verbatim transcription.

training at our wine sensory lab down in Penticton, but again, it's affiliated with our Culinary Diploma program. So it's part of the curriculum, but a limited part of it. So they have to be going through that program and they frontload and backload it with their business and management programs with their culinary training in between.

I am the manager of culinary arts. I'm in charge of the food service workers and then also the culinary arts instructors. So I don't teach per se, I manage the instructors. We have a total of six instructors. We also have one of our instructors over at Mount Boucherie Secondary School for our dual credit program. He has a limited curriculum there with the dual credit students—they do high school and then they come over here, and they also work their PC1 over here. Although it's not the complete PC1 because they need to achieve their industry hours to have that. But they do have their training that blends in with what they're offered over in their curriculum there. It's only about eight students who come that route, it's quite small. I think their capacity over there is twelve but we end up having about eight just by natural attrition. And that's something that we face in the industry too—part of the challenge now is that the attrition rate is higher than ever because it's a direct correlation with the economy. When the economy gets good, and the oil sands call, why am I going to pay for my cook's training when I can go up north and make 70-80 thousand dollars a year and I don't need any paper? That's prevalent in Alberta too. I just toured SAIT (South Alberta Institute of Technology) last week, and the baking and pastry arts is the most successful there, and the other programs are all getting pulled. The Alberta government released this statistic, 25 percent of high school students do not complete high school now. 25 percent, that's crazy. We're also really finding that the gender difference is switching over in the cooking industry, it's all females. Like pastry arts last year, we had eighteen females. This year we have two gentlemen in it, so still it's like 15:2.

ME: If you compare your time when you were training as a chef to what you're doing now, what sorts of changes in terms of focus and scope of practice or the kind of training you offer have occurred over the last fifteen years? What are the differences between your own experience training as a chef and the experiences of the chefs that you're training now?

BC: I think that if you were to look at the training now, one word that would describe it is distilled. We took a vast amount from before so that it would take ten years to become a chef and you distill that down to five or six years now. And it's more concentrated, more focused. I think it's multifaceted simply because of the ability to buy everything and anything now, and the internet. I think the internet plays a huge role in it, and allows a chef to become worldlier versed, where before you'd have to go to the school to get experience or you'd have to travel to find that. It's good and bad, a double edged sword to say the least. If you do know how to buy that cut of beef or that cut of fish, how do you know if it's a good cut of fish or beef unless you have that hands-on practical experience and someone is showing you what it should be? And then the leadership of it, the maturing of the chefs and how they run their teams, and what people actually want out of that purposed training that they're under. So, it's kind of a double edged sword, neither good nor bad, fact of life, and that's just the way it is. But there is still value in a great apprenticeship, nothing can supersede that.

ME: Would you say there are any changes in terms of the mix between the practical skill sets attached to making good food, and some of the other skill sets associated with being a chef responsible for supply chain, responsible for your basic approach to food, how it connects to other sorts of issues within a particular community? That scope of consciousness?

BC: Yeah, I think that has changed along with the non-conventional way of becoming a chef. Some of the leading restaurants in North America have "non-certified" chefs at their helm. So that's non-conventional, and how they source their food, write their menus and prepare their food is non-conventional. I think it comes down to ethics. I myself have children who are no longer children, in their early thirties, and they're just so socially aware of the impact they're leaving on the earth. That is very prevalent with that young chefs now, which is fantastic because they're outside the conventional means of purchasing, they don't need to have that one big truck pull up delivering fruit from around the world. So it means that they're more rooted in the community. Ten years ago it was rare to find a restaurant like that, now it's rare to find one that isn't like that. And I have to say they are the ones that are probably struggling, because they're not on that social edge and they're not on the radar of all those people coming out to dine in their establishments. And chances are those restaurants that are dying

are the ones that aren't actively engaged in social media, they're not out at the different conferences that are dealing with sustainable seafood or anything like that.

ME: Do you incorporate any of that into your training practices here now, that way of thinking about how you run a kitchen?

BC: Absolutely. Absolutely, we have to show them that social reliance on our suppliers. We're trying to adhere to 20 percent of our curriculum being out in the field. If that's the fish monger, that's the beef, we have to take them to an abattoir to show them the slaughtering of an animal, we have to take them out in the garden and pull a carrot and plant a carrot. It's amazing how many of the young people don't do that and when I say young, I mean, I'm not talking high school students, I'm talking early twenties or even early thirties and they're just disconnected from their food. They just don't get it, and they love the passion, again the internet, they love Food Network and everything but they just don't get where that food comes from. So we are really, really pushing forward on that.

I think we do that with the Okanagan Chefs Association (OCA). We have a very strong associate membership and it is about education. That is probably the mantra that we sit on: education. And that's not sitting in a classroom with videos playing or referring to textbooks, it's more the interaction with suppliers and the supply chain. Why are spot prawns better than white tiger prawns coming out of Vietnam? Why are they better, and not just saying "These are better for the Earth so buy them" but giving them the education on that. I think that is the big one, to connect people with the information and allow them to make a rational decision.

ME: So what is it that makes a good supplier relationship? And how do you teach your students about those sorts of things?

BC: I think it's two-way communication that's really needed. We talk to them with the local purveyors, so we're sitting in the classroom with them, when they come in to do demos and the chef instructors are prompting the students to ask the open questions so that they understand that. My favorite is with a farmer that is working in a beautiful fertile valley and asks the chef "What do you want me to grow?" And the chef says

“Well, I want this, I want that, I want this, and I want this,” and meanwhile the farmer can’t make it grow there, because the valley is not conducive to that product, and business folds. Whereas if the farmer asks the chef “What would you like me to grow?” the chef should say, more importantly, “What can you grow? What can you make money at, on your mainstream crop, and what can you consider boutique? What is nice to have but not urgent to have? So what can you grow, what can you make money at?” And that type of symbiotic relationship I think is what makes both of them prosper. Because obviously if the farmer can grow that product easily and it’s not a huge burden to him or her, then they can sell it at a good amount of money and then they can play with the little boutique stuff that’s just not mainstream at all. I think that’s the important thing in teaching the students, I mean, I’ve had countless apprentices in my life so any young chef should work on that and work on great two-way communication rather than an egotistical relationship. You know, don’t say, “You’re only growing this for me, that’s all I want, I want you to grow this stuff, and I’m the only one in the valley that’s going to have it.” That’s usually a one-way trip. So it just has to be two ways.

ME: Right, so the example you just gave is a direct farm to chef relationship. How do you feel about secondary suppliers versus direct suppliers?

BC: The pressure from the farm-to-table movement is so strong that the big boys now, the CISCOS and the GFSs of the world, they are feeling the pressure from their customer base, that if they want to have a share of that market sector they have to have that relationship with their suppliers. So now they are developing that. Belman’s Farm up in North Okanagan, they’re huge in the bell peppers, the carrots, the root vegetables, baby beets and that, and they supply CISCO and GFS so they’re getting a broader reach than say just working with six chefs. So they’re bringing those values to them, it is having that impact on the big suppliers. And then when you deal with food importers and go out of the fields and more into the artisan style vinegars and oils and infusions and that’s having an impact too, because they’re realizing that if you’re interested in those beautiful candy cane beets instead of a beet root from California, then you’re going to be interested in these little boutique oils. So, it is

having that impact, and it supports that mindset over in Europe or, eastern, western, wherever it happens to be.

ME: And how does that fit into emerging business models? There's often a premium price on sustainable or organic foods or specialty items like that. How do you see those things coming together now as chefs try to make money as chefs?

BC: Well, stay in business. Period. Have a bottom line. Marketing. You have to be on the marketing, it gives you a competitive edge over your other competitors. And also too, knowing your marketplace. If you're going into a Kettle Valley community and you're looking at that and it's all dual income families with young children, and you're going in with a nightclub scene, well you're in the wrong marketplace. So having that business plan, that business model, and knowing what you're going to market yourself as and abiding by that, making sure you're in the right place at the right time. And then having the skill set to be flexible and change the plans. So you have that. Are we totally organic? No. Are we totally local? No. That's not a good business model. There is RauDZ Regional Table, he's done it and he's done a very, very good job at it. You don't see strawberries in his restaurant in the middle of winter. He doesn't believe in that. And he's created that and he's spent a lot of marketing on that and he's driven that, so you know, he's doing fantastic with that. But overall you have to be flexible. As a hotel chef for example, you have to give the customers what they're looking for, otherwise they go somewhere else. If they come to you looking for that, that's different. But if they come to you for a service and you're not able to service them, then you're doing a disservice. It's a bit of a can of worms all right.

ME: Obviously you've got decades of experience in this space. How do you transmit that experience about these sorts of macro system issues to the students?

BC: Yeah, that's through the mentorship. I guess the big things I'm picking up from the chef instructors here is that they provide tidbits of information. Because, like you say, it's very complicated and very widespread and very opinionated. But with that comes that whole apprenticeship and mentorship, so with that you latch onto a chef and realize where you want to go, what avenue you are going to go in. Are you going to go into the camps? Are you going to go into hotels? Are you going to be pastry?

Are you going to be in production? They have to come up with that, because the culinary world is a big world. And then from there they just make the right steps and they see if they can find that peace with themselves and find out what they want. So, no real answer to that one.

ME: How do you see chefs within that wider regional food system? Or wider food system more generally? What role do you see them playing now, what role do you see them maybe taking on in the future? What do you want for chefs in terms of their role, fundamentally, within that wider food system?

BC: Be local. Act local. Our local people need support. We don't need farmers harvesting peaches, and then hearing that Washington has dumped peaches on us and now our main purveyors of peaches are dumping them at \$3 a case. Which is just asinine, it's just absolutely ridiculous. And we need to support local. We need to give local a chance. That's the biggest singular factor, and I say this from a very passionate point of view because I'm old enough to... I didn't know it at the time but I was just this young, rebel, Canadian chef who got his cook's training on the Island [Vancouver Island] and went into Vancouver, in my home province, and was denied many jobs because I was Canadian. I didn't have European training, I didn't have this, and I went, well. The "ah-ha" for me in my career was when I was cooking in Expo 86, having the premier club in Expo and feeding the royalty, Chuck and Di and everybody, and realizing that I didn't want to cook German, I didn't want to cook French, I wanted to be Canadian. I wanted to use Canadian products and have people come visit us and be Canadian. So pushing through and giving locals a chance. They called me Jonny Canuck for years. I was a Sous Chef finally, the first West Coast, Canadian trained Sous Chef in Vancouver, and that was in 1981. So we're not talking 1950, we're talking 1981-84 right? And then realizing, I didn't realize at the time, like I said '86 and then even into '90 saying, "No, I want to be local. Give me a chance." In '91 I went to compete in France. I was standing there as a young Canadian out of Whistler. "Where the hell is Whistler? Well it's tucked up in the ski resort. Oh, fondue and beer, oh okay got ya." I was the opening chef of the Chateau Whistler and putting the stamp on the map and saying that we are here and basing it around local. Starting Whistler's farmers market and saying "Why did you start that?" Well, I got tired of

ordering these fantastic tomatoes in these ornate wooden crates coming out of Lillooet and they're the best tomatoes and then walking into the grocery store and saying, "Okay there's Florida tomatoes. Nice lacrosse balls that we're playing with today!" Or, you can have these beautiful Lillooet tomatoes.

I came out of Whistler after eighteen years. Whistler was pretty cool, it's got its own little climate there and it's almost insulated as such. But what I see in the Okanagan compared to Vancouver is a real sense of community. That's what I'd like to see in the future and what I'd really like to harp on is the fact that we as a community will prosper and you need to have competition within the community but it should be friendly and neighborly, and it shouldn't be malicious or destructive in any sense. We all compete, we all roll in and say we're here as a team, but at the same time you want to be recognized as being at the front, you don't want to be in the middle or the back of the class, you want to be at the front leading the charge. I think with the sense of community comes the sense of information sharing, more so, and that is what is imperative to success. So if our fishmonger puts a request out to support the sustainable scallop industry on the east coast then we take a look at it and say "absolutely." Because he's the one that doesn't really toot his horn on sustainable seafood, but he comes through and says this is an issue that needs to be dealt with while he has all of that influence from his world of influence, so we as chefs buy into it and support him. Because when we ask him to stand up and support Farm Folk/City Folk, which is a farm, not seafood, but is all about sustainability, then he's at the table and he's there and he brings it. So, that sense of community. That sense of community pride definitely.

Give local a chance. As business you have to make it go, but you also have to have a sense of community and you also have to give people a reason to come live there. Imagine the Okanagan without the fruit and the wine culture. BC wine is expensive, BC foods, fruits are expensive but they're also here so why don't you give them a chance? For example, look at the beautiful Flemish pear that we just had harvested instead of that pear that's been gas flushed, transported from here, put into here, put this here, and then handled there, okay give it a few days on the counter and it'll be good. Well, it's never going to be as good as the one picked in its prime condition,

tomatoes, carrots, beets, everything. I think that's the big thing for me. We all make decisions and you have budgets to abide by, whether it's your personal household income or whatever budgets, but at the same time, maybe you don't need five pounds of carrots from California, maybe you need a single bunch that'll cost the same as five pounds but it's here, it's local. And you're not going to throw out the 23 percent of your food that an average household discards through waste. Focus on getting that back. Well we're all guilty, you open that fridge and say "Why do we have these big coolers?" when you go to Europe or you go to Italy and they have little coolers. Well, they shop for what they need. They don't store, they shop. So that's the mentality. I do that also with the kitchens where I work with my apprentices, working it backwards and saying "What do we need?" not, "What should we purchase?" So it's all about local for me and local pride and local product, local people.