

## On a Mission to make chefs

**Laura Robin, Ottawa Citizen**

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For the last three years, the Ottawa Wine & Food Festival has partnered with The Ottawa Mission, donating thousands of dollars from unused drink tickets and empty wine bottles to help buy Christmas dinners for the homeless. This year, the tables will be turned.

At a session called Mission: Potable on the afternoon of Saturday, Oct. 31, men and women from the Mission will be cooking small plates of Christmas dinner for well-heeled festival goers. The event is aimed at offering attendees tips on preparing holiday meals and choosing wines to match, but it shines a light on a remarkable program.

For the last decade, Mission chef Ric Watson — himself a survivor of addiction and life on the street — has offered chef training through a program at The Mission.

“A handful of the students have been homeless, staying at the Mission, but all have been on social services and at risk,” says Watson. “The program began very basic, but it has grown and evolved. Now we put on two five-month programs each year.”

And here’s the kicker: “We’ve had a 100-per-cent placement rate for our last three classes of graduates.”

John Raymond says he saw a notice about the chef’s training program when he was in The Mission’s cafeteria for lunch.

“It appealed to me because I had worked as a cook before, at The Olive Garden on Merivale Road,” says the 52-year-old. “Then I worked for 28 years as a tire technician for Goodyear, but that blew out my knees.

“I was in the Mission’s recovery zone when I started the program. Now I’ve been clean and sober for eight months. The program is absolutely amazing. Chef Ric is a fantastic teacher. I’ve also received my high school diploma through the credits I’ve got from his course.

“I’ve been hired to work in the kitchen at Carleton University,” he said last Friday. “I start this afternoon.”



Mission Chef Ric Watson preparing food with students at the Britannia United Church Saturday October 17, 2015. Watson offers a five-month culinary training program to men and women who are reliant on social services and at risk of homelessness. Ashley Fraser / Ottawa Citizen

The program, which is funded through donations and partnered with Ontario Works (a program for people in financial need), includes practical experience in The Mission’s spotless kitchen, classroom lessons in The Mission’s chapel and placements in Ottawa restaurant kitchens and catering companies.

Watson smiles when he talks about another student who was a political refugee from Africa and could not speak English when he arrived at The Mission.

“He finished the course, got his high-school diploma and went on to do the two-year culinary program at Algonquin College. Now he works full-time and has his own house. He still stops by to say hello.”

The seven remaining students in this fall’s program at The Mission (several others have already been hired to work elsewhere) will not only help prepare the holiday meal for the Wine & Food Festival session at 2 p.m. Oct. 31, they will also assist chefs from the Canadian Culinary Chefs Federation prepare high-end hors d’oeuvres for the premium Tasting Alleys on the Friday and Saturday evenings.

“It’s a fantastic chance to get experience,” says Raymond.

Joan Culliton, producer of the Wine & Food Festival, says she hopes the festival’s relationship with the program will continue to grow.

“Last year, when Jamie Kennedy was here, he wanted to go over and meet the staff at The Mission — that was very impressive,” says Culliton.

“Right now, one of the sexiest things you can do is be a chef. What Ric is doing is helping people build a next chapter of their lives. We couldn’t be more proud to be involved.”