



Meet **The Chef**

Andrea Nicholson | Butchie's

Students from Durham College sat down to interview Andrea. Here's the full interview, with excerpts featured in the Town's new Food Guide.

Q. We've noticed Butchies keeps growing and innovating, so we are interested in what restaurant and food and beverage trends you keep up with that influence what you do at Butchies?

A. There are some really great trend-setting habits that happen in food, and McCormick's, the leading spice company, comes up with the 2020 to 2023 trends of the year for culinary and food.

While I think trends are really great, trends are trends for a reason; they come and they go. I think being a successful restaurateur is listening to your customers and knowing what they want – to be able to provide a high-quality product. And while we do introduce trends in certain ways, we introduce them as specials or as features. The 2020 trend was gochujang? . We don't necessarily bring it in as a [regular] menu item but as a special here and there, because next year [the trend will be gone] and something new will come around.

It's also really important to stick to the classics, the basics and things that people want. And that's it. You really have to watch your business and see what's important. We also do a lot of customer engagement. On all of our social media platforms, we're constantly asking our customers, "What do you want?" "Do you like this?" We take polls, we survey and we listen. And I think being as successful as Butchies has been is because we've really listened to our customers. If we launched something that was trendy and it wasn't very successful, we moved on to something else. Being observant of the industry and to the clientele is very, very important when you're doing trends.

Q. The customer experience is obviously important to your business. What are the strategies you use to attract new customers and keep existing ones coming back?

A. We are unique. Butchies is located on a very busy road; so, we get a lot of traffic just from the highway. We're also a bit of a unique building, and that attracts people and because I have a Food Network persona. We [also] have a large social media following. And social media, specifically Instagram, has been one of the largest platforms for us – hands down – in the way we're able to attract new customers. Just a photo of really delicious food has been a game-changer across the platform for hospitality. We do a lot of marketing campaigns on there. We do paid advertisement through Instagram and Facebook.

Everybody's on their phone, everybody's on a tablet, everybody's digital, so being able to tap into new customers in that sense, has been a game-changer. I would say 90 per cent of our new customer engagement comes through social media, paid advertisement, plus being extremely active. If you go on to our Butchies Facebook or Instagram page, you'll notice that every single day we post. We're also active on our stories. It's engagement. People want to come to us; people want to know what's going on and feel part of the business, and when you can engage in that sense, then they feel like they are part of the Butchies community.

Being extremely hospitable when you're in the space is really important. As a customer, you start noticing hospitality cues when you go to a restaurant... when you don't necessarily get greeted by a hostess, or if somebody doesn't say goodbye to you or they're not doing quality checks at the table. These fundamental things are pillars of our business.

When you walk into my restaurant, you'll get a "Hi guys, how are you doing?" from the crew. When you leave, they say goodbye. And those are the takeaways from a really great business — [things] that will have you wanting to come back for more. Don't get me wrong; we're not perfect. We have dropped the ball now and again. But it's these fundamentals that we have set into place as our policies that attract new customers to come back again and again.

Q. Does Butchies have a specialty dish?

A. I wouldn't say we necessarily have a specialty dish that we started off with, but we've sort of landed on one. Butchies is a "meat plus three" concept, which means a customer can choose a [meat] protein and then one, two or three sides. You see a lot [of this concept] in the southern parts of the United States, like Nashville and down in Florida. I love that idea because I'm the type of person who loves to eat with a lot of different options on my plate. I like to pick and choose a little bit of everything.

So, our specialty dish is southern barbecue — not one specific item. However, our buttermilk-fried chicken fingers have become a standout. People love fried meat! And our chicken fingers have risen to the top — we've won a couple of awards for them, and I would say that 75 per cent of our customers who come in daily order those.

Q. What dish do you have the most fun creating and recommend that people try?

A. If a customer asks me what my favourite thing on the menu is, I say it's the country-fried steak. It's a steak that we pound really thin and then we buttermilk-fried bread it, and then we fry it and pour a white bacon gravy on it. It's super low calorie; just kidding! It's perfect with a side of Brussels sprouts and my grandmother's cucumber salad and a deviled egg. That would be my go-to suggestion. Our hot Nashville chicken sandwich is also really popular.

My chef Karina, who is in charge of our kitchen, would probably say that she enjoys making the specials the most, so once a week we have really fun specials and we have fun with them. A couple of weeks ago we did a dill pickle potato chip-fried chicken sandwich. It was crazy popular! it's just a fun, whimsical take on carnival food.

Q. What is your favourite type of food and, if you want to share, where do you like to dine in Whitby?

A. My favourite type of food is Eastern European. I am half Ukrainian, and I love Ukrainian foods — cabbage rolls, perogies, meat on the stick, borscht, you name it. I grew up with it — it reminds me of my grandmother. I think if you ask most people what their favourite kind of food is, it's probably a food that has evoked fond memories of something.

One of my favourite restaurants in Whitby is KB. It's named after Kevin Brown, the chef. He pulls a lot of seasonality out of his menus and deals with a lot of local vendors, so I can very much appreciate that. And, I know it's not Whitby, but I also love Teddy's in Oshawa.

Q. Let's talk about Whitby and how its food scene is growing. Why did you choose to open your restaurant in Whitby?

A. I'm a Torontonian, born and bred. We moved to south Ajax almost 10 years ago, and I quickly realized that there weren't a lot of restaurants that, with respect, I would dine at. At the time, I had a high-profile job at Maple Leaf foods as a corporate chef, but I had always set a goal for myself that by the time I was 30, I would open my own restaurant with no partners — just by myself.

Life kind of took hold and we ended up moving to Ajax about 10 years ago. And I thought, it's time to do something. I actually joined the cast of Top Chef All Stars. When we had moved to Ajax, and going back to doing Top Chef, kind of sparked that. I had sort of transitioned back to the corporate world, and I was doing food styling and I was doing things here and there, but I realized I had to get back into a restaurant if I wanted to achieve my goal of opening one at 30.

I was 32 when we moved to Ajax, and [my husband and I] had gone for ice cream one night in Whitby, and we landed in this restaurant called Shake, Rabble and Roll, which is now Butchies. They were hosting an old vintage car show. We pulled in and I said to my husband, "This place has so much potential." We would go back for ice cream once a week, or sometimes a burger and fries, and every time I'd sit there and say, "This place is a goldmine. We should do something here." So, I did Top Chef All Stars and when I came back, I called my real estate agent and said, "Can you find me a restaurant? Find me something in Durham. I think it's time to open something out here."

And the first restaurant for sale that she sent me was Shake, Rabble and Roll. And I said, "You've got to be kidding me! Put an offer on it. Go. I want this restaurant!" And so here we are five years later.

I bought Butchies because there was a massive demand for the Butchies concept that I had in mind, and the business plan I created was a perfect fit. It hit the demographic in Durham. It hit the need. It hit the fact that we have so many families looking for a fun spot. We didn't have barbecue in town. We didn't have places that were really cooking from scratch and that were very chef-driven. And that was one thing that I wanted to bring to Whitby: a chef-driven restaurant. It also has an acre of property, which in the restaurant world is so rare. It checked a lot of boxes,





and it was on a busy road. That's why we call it a would-be home — and it has so much potential — and Whitby is one of the fastest growing cities in Canada.

Q. How would you describe the food and beverage scene in Whitby?

A. I would say it's evolving; it's growing. In the last five years, we've seen such a great trajectory. Durham is such an incredible greenbelt for us in Ontario. And it's untapped. But we're starting to see vendors and we're starting to see restaurants tap into those local markets, local farmers and local resources, which is amazing! I think our craft beer scene is really helping amplify that as well, with all these great craft breweries that are coming in. It's just a matter of time until we're going to get more and more really cool restaurants. And the citizens of Whitby are recognizing that we are starting to get some really amazing high-quality restaurants within the town.

Q. Being on Top Chef Canada is a very note-worthy accomplishment. What was it like being a contestant?

A. I've had a 27-year career in culinary arts. It was a goal of mine to always work at the best restaurants in Toronto. I trained under Susur Lee, I trained under Mark Thuet, I worked for Lynn Crawford. In the 90s and the early 2000s, I had checked off the boxes. I used to go to the back of Toronto Life magazine and see all the five-star restaurants and say I want to go work there. By the time I was 22, I had worked at some of the best restaurants and . And then I left Canada and worked on a really high-end cruise line and yacht. And when I came back to Canada, I started running restaurants. I was 22 when I came back, and I was an executive chef at my first restaurant. I was probably one of the youngest executive chefs, female, in Ontario, in Toronto. But at the time, and still to this day a little bit, being a chef in this industry is still very much a man's world and women don't get the platform that men do as a chef. We're called a female chef. Not just chef. It's like a female doctor. No, it's just doctor. I wanted to say, "I'm here. I'm really good at what I do. I can smoke any guy under the table in cooking, so give me a platform.

Restaurant reviews were a very big thing at the time, and we would have the occasional review here and there. But when Top Chef announced there was going to be a Canadian version of it, I was all in because I was a massive, massive fan of the American version. I said, "I'm applying to the show," and I've always had this "what do I have to lose" kind of mentality with life. I mean, we're on this planet for hopefully 90-plus years, so make the best of it, and it's such an opportunity. So, I applied and I auditioned and I got accepted in the first season, which was amazing!

The first season opened up so many doors for me. TV provides credibility. I've gotten to travel the world. I've gone to different countries to cook because of the affiliation with Top Chef. I've had job opportunities. It's been amazing. And then I've come back since to do the Top Chef All Stars. And now I'm a judge on Fire Masters. [which is] an amazing show, too. Because of Top Chef, I've been exposed to this [television] platform and opportunities, and highlighted my talents and skill set, which was essentially the reason why I did it.

Q. What was your biggest takeaway from that experience, and how has it influenced what you do now as a chef?

A. I think it always comes back to just being creative. Being a chef, the plate is my canvas. It's the way I express my art. I always like to be challenged by different types of cuisines. And I'm constantly watching new techniques and how food is evolving across the world. Like right now, I'm really into Turkish cuisine. I just happened to fall onto some sort of Turkish feeds on my Instagram, and I keep watching food from Turkey in their live videos — I'm fascinated by it. So, I will go out and I will want to taste the flavours. I haven't really been exposed to Turkey that much. I'm still a student. I'm still really interested in what's going on in my field, and it excites me. I'm hoping that we can get a really rad Turkish restaurant here in Whitby.

I'm just excited by food and how you can take a raw ingredient and manipulate it into something beautiful. That's what really excites me!