Out with a bang: Food Network’s Alton Brown, fireworks put some pop in UGA commencement

Recipe for success? Blaze your own trail, grads told

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The nearly 4,000 University of Georgia students who received degrees in Sanford Stadium on Saturday are graduating during uncertain times, but that uncertainty also may be a blessing.

“I have got some good news: The road to success has been paved over with a parking lot,” said Alton Brown, the Peabody Award-winning Food Network host who gave the 2010 commencement speech. “What’s worse is that most of the destinations aren’t there anymore. So, you know what? You’re going have to pave your own. It’s a wide-open field, a land of opportunity again, which it has not been for the last 200 years. You’re going to have to blaze the trail yourself.

“Sorry. But I wish I was you.”

An estimated 40,000 relatives, friends and well-wishers filed into the stadium on Saturday evening to recognize their loved ones’ accomplishments. Speakers praised the graduates for all the work they’ve put into their degrees, but also gave them a pep talk fit for troops about to march into battle.

Brown, who attended UGA during the 1980s but didn’t graduate until 2004, hosts popular Food Network shows like “Iron Chef America” and “Good Eats.”

Parents, grandparents and siblings were hopeful for their graduates’ futures, but students themselves seemed to have tempered their hope with a little anxiety.

“Excited, but scared,” is how public relations graduate Allen Orr described the feeling.

“Even friends graduating with finance degrees don’t have jobs and are thinking, ‘What can I go back to grad school for until things get better?’” said Mary Ann Cochran, who graduated with a degree in communications disorders. “It seems like just graduating with a degree doesn’t mean a lot for you right now.”

This year’s graduates watched the economy tank during their college years, hoping that the job market would turn around by the time they stepped out into the work world.
That turmoil has made them stronger, capable of finding success and fulfillment even during hard times, UGA President Mike Adams told the crowd.

“In the last two years, you’ve learned about a 100-year drought, a 500-year flood and a great recession,” Adams said. “It’s been said by many that hard times don’t build character; they reveal it. We believe that the character that has been revealed here, implicit in the class of 2010, is a very strong one.”

Brown acknowledged that both parents and graduates have a mixture of excitement and anxiety, but he used humor to try to diffuse the fears.

“Jobs don’t fulfill people; people fulfill jobs,” Brown said.

A drama major himself, Alton told new graduates that they have no idea where they will land.

“You will end up in jobs so far off the path that you think you want to follow, that you will not put yourself into them. There is no job that’s a waste of time unless you waste your time. Don’t.”

The crowd rewarded Brown with a standing ovation.

The mixture of dry, dark humor and boot-strap optimism seemed harsh, but it was exactly what students wanted to hear, said telecommunications graduate Sara Balke. She plans to attend the Culinary Institute of America in 2011 with hopes of working for Food Network.

“It’s the perfect speaker for me,” Balke said. “He did something different. It’s important for us to know that we need to follow our passion.”