

Getting Whitewash started and the subject opened up 9/22/96

It may seem odd that this is attached to a story about a restaurateur but that one, who had been my friend, was an important factor in my making a success of Whitewash when it appeared. Not that it made for exceptional sales in Washington. Rather ^{it is} that Francois prepared me for what it took to make the book a success in New York and in that way open the subject up.

Francois was my customer as well as my friend when we farmed. ^{He} got what poultry and eggs he took home from me and seasonally, geese and specialty birds for special occasions at the restaurant. His Chez Francois was in a small but good hotel in the first block of Connecticut Avenue, on the West side, which is between H and I Streets NW.

Hubert Bermont, who managed what was then Washington's largest bookstore, got interested in me at the June American Booksellers Association annual convention, then always in Washington. Hubie arranged for me to be on my first talk show. I'd not even listened to any one of them then. It was Steve Allison, and his was a people-eater format. He broadcast from a small restaurant east of Chez Francois by several blocks and a bit south of it. It was on a Saturday night.

I'd had a phone call that day, after our mail had gone, from an executive of the New American Library. As I recall his name it was Kuhn. He wanted a copy of the book as fast as possible. So, I left for Washington early and knew where there would be a mail collection that afternoon. It was a block from Francois'. So, I mailed the book (and wasted it and the time and cost) and went down to see Francois and perhaps have a drink with him. I had several hours.

When he learned I had time to spend he took me into his office rather than have me sit in the restaurant. He had me plied with whiskey and as often as he could came in and we chatted. There was an older man, I think his uncle, also there. Before long a waiter cleared a space on Francois' desk and then put a place setting there. Then there was a meal. At that point Francois appeared and told me to move over, it was for me, to prepare me for the radio show. If I had not been a bit relaxed from the drinking I'd probably not have tasted l'escargot for the first time. Those snails were absolutely delicious! And he kept plying me with drink. Meanwhile we talked when he was free. He had me feeling relaxed when he told me it was time for me to get to the show.

He knew Allison and he knew his people-eater reputation. He had his own way of preparing me for that and it worked.

I was relaxed when Allison started picking on me and on the subject and I stayed that way long enough for him to deliver the audience to me. There is nothing like being abused to deliver the audience and learning that was to be quite im-

portant to me. But after a while, without conscious thought of it, I began to get annoyed and felt I did not have to be all that polite. I started letting him have pointed answers and he and the audience in that restaurant liked that very much. It was when I stopped taking his nastiness and abuses that it got to be a good show and the visible reaction told me that.

My next show was big-time for radio and for the day. It was the Long John Nebel Show on clear-channel WNBC in New York. Its audience, from the reaction to that show, was from the Arctic to the Antilles. I had a letter from a guy in Canada who told me how many hundre miles he was above the closest bookstore. And from the southern ~~island~~ islands. That show, on which I confronted along with the far-right Nebel, Kirin O'Daughterly, then the head of Bill Buckley's Conservative Party, and Victor Tasky, attracted TV attention and led to me being on TV. I did on it what Francois loosened me up to be able to do with Allison and I did that also on the first TV show, on the then largest independent, Channel 5, ~~WNEW~~ WNEW, in NYC. That show ^{made} ~~was~~ Whitewash the best-selling work of nonfiction in New York the week after it aired. I had to reprint it several times.

If Francois had not loaded me up with liquor and relaxed me and had me feeling good and if he had not fed me so well, which contributed to that good feeling, I might have ^u allowed Allison to intimidate me. (He and the station had me back several times ^{before} ~~after~~ he left for Los Angeles.) Then I might have been intimidated by Nebel and fellow right-wingers. With what I'd learned thanks to Francois and the people-eater format of Allison, is what I did on WNBC, let those boors pick on me until I believed, as it turned out correctly, they had offended their audience and delivered it to me. When I cut loose I ridiculed them openly, spoofed them, helped them make fools of themselves, and when the program broke for a fifteen minute newscast after 2 1/2 hours the reaction wifed in and read was fantastic. It shamed them. Nebel was muffing his lines on commercials even!

During the break there was excellent refreshment in the control room. One of Broadway's fine delicatessens sent over a great abundance of fine sandwiches and soda waters. After the break, when faced with the antagonism of his audience on the phone and by wire, Nebel decided to close the show down abruptly. He went into the control room and told them what tape of what previous show to play and he signed the program off by thanking his pals and saying good night to them and not even mentioning my name! Which was wonderful!

His staff in the control room was also influenced. It packed up all the many sandwiches not used and an abundance of Dr. Brown's Celery Tonic and Cream Soda along with openers because it knew I'd be driving home after the show and could be hungry. As I was. I was very happy and very tired, not having been abed for more than 24 hours.

SCHOOL

Food fads come and go, but at his Great Falls country inn, Francois Haeringer runs a strictly traditionalist kitchen. His sons chafe, Francois fumes—and somehow, it all turns out right By Edward Cody

BEEF WELLINGTON IS A SPECIALTY THIS SATURDAY NIGHT, and loaves of prime meat are ready for a full house of diners about to arrive. After one false start, the Perigueux sauce tastes right, a proper stock embracing the rich foie gras. Red-jacketed waiters stand poised in the rosy glow of the dining rooms, all serenity and warmth, while back in the kitchen the haute cuisine version of pregame tension has everyone on edge. Suddenly from the row of assistant chefs comes a question. How thick should the slices be? "About like this," the chef, Francois Haeringer, orders, holding up his thumb and marking off a respectable length. "Okay," the assistant responds, flashing his own thumb in imitation of the master. "No," Francois hurls back, "not your thumb. My thumb!"

That's the way it is at L'Auberge Chez Francois, the venerable French restaurant situated beside a winding lane on the frontier between suburbia and horse country near Great Falls. Francois Haeringer—founder, owner and inspiration—runs his Alsatian inn as his empire.

Directing a staff of 85, he mobilizes the salad crew and dispatches the pastry chefs with the tyranny of Gen. George Patton orchestrating tank columns toward battle with the Nazis. He carves filets from tenderloins with the peremptory single-mindedness of a star surgeon.

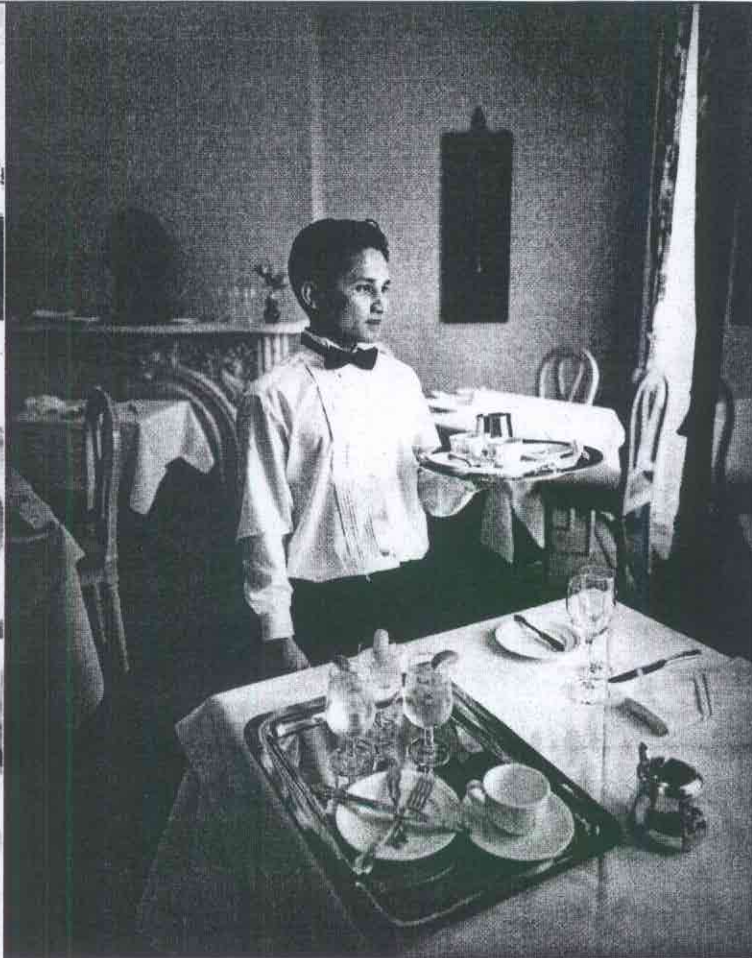
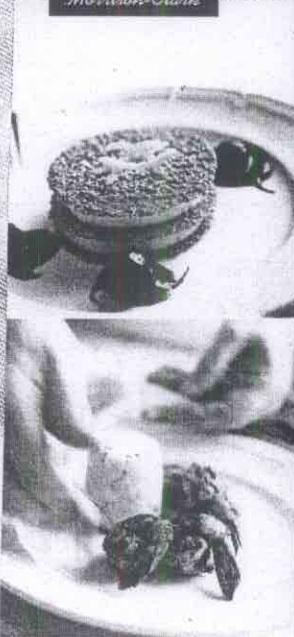
"David, my knife," he shouts, and holds out his hand as if a nurse were about to hand him a scalpel. David Becker, a 36-year-old cook from Annandale who has worked at Chez Francois for eight years, still says, "Yes, sir" as he turns over the knife.

"Robert, the five peppers," Francois commands, freezing until a little pot of seasonings is placed before him so he can add the final dash to a simmering sauce. Robert is one of the three Haeringer sons who work with—and under—the diminutive kitchen emperor with black-rimmed glasses, a scruffy white goatee and a

Francois Haeringer

IS THE ABSOLUTE RULER OF HIS KITCHEN. AS ONE SON PUTS IT, "HE SAYS, THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY—THAT'S MY WAY."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL MCLAUGHLIN



Galileo EXECUTIVE CHEF TODD GRAY AT THE STOVE; BELOW, ROASTED SEA BASS WITH SAFFRON RISOTTO CAKE. *Morrison-Clark* TEA IS SERVED BY BUSBOY DUC NGUYEN. AMONG THE TEMPTING DESSERTS IS THE LEMON SESAME NAPOLEON WITH BLACKBERRY COMPOTE, MIDDLE LEFT. SOUTHERN-INSPIRED APPETIZERS INCLUDE, BOTTOM LEFT, GARLIC GRITS TIMBALE WITH SPICY SHRIMP.

meld as though they had been simmered together with their pungent spices for days. On the other hand, roasted rack of veal is coddled with slow and careful cooking, and salmon, too, is cooked slowly—so its flesh barely gels, a beautiful texture. Then there are three different preparations of foie gras, and lobster in ravioli or poached with a flowery ginger-lime-sauternes sauce. The desserts are light and fragrant, from a blood-orange soup to a lemon crepe soufflé. Gerard's Place has dignity but no stuffiness—the kind of restaurant every gastronome hopes to have on a list of the little-known treasures of Paris.

915 15th St. NW. 202-737-4445. Open: for lunch Monday through Friday 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; for dinner Monday through Thursday 5:30 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. Closed Sunday. AE, DC, MC, V. Entree prices: lunch \$14.50 to \$27.50, dinner \$16.50 to \$29.50.

GOLDONI When a chef breaks out on his own to open his first restaurant, he's often timid at the beginning—or maybe too ambitious and experimental. Thus it's been with Goldoni, where chef Fabrizio Aielli has come out from under the wing of Galileo's Roberto Donna. But my most recent meal at Goldoni was a triumph, the work of an experienced chef showing the range of his talent.

A layered appetizer of potato, eggplant and fontina cheese with a light sauce of dried tomatoes was a distillation of Mediterranean summer on a plate. The pasta, fat stuffed tortelli with a heady black filling of portobello mushrooms and ricotta, was superb: delicate in texture, straightforward and powerful as the best of Italian cooking. A veal entree—tenderloin rolled with asparagus, fritata and prosciutto, poised on a glossy brown rosemary sauce with a garnish of asparagus and spinach—was far more elaborate, and astonishingly good. For dessert, who could eat more than a little sorbet? But with such choices as herbed lemon sorbet or blackberry with pepper and red wine, one certainly wouldn't want to miss out.

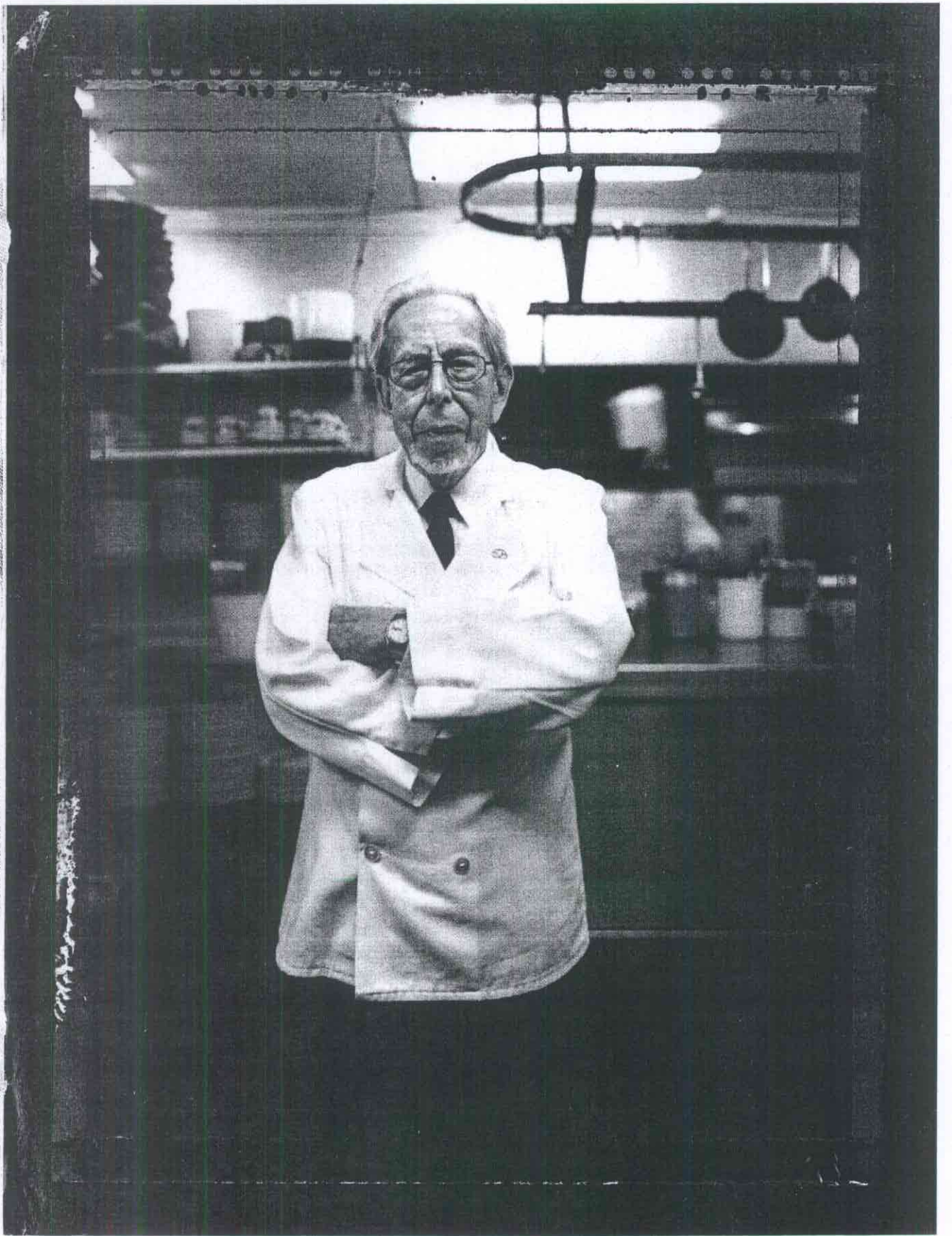
And cooking isn't all at Goldoni. The food is enhanced by a dignified serving staff and a soaring skylit white dining room—modern and spare, yet lush with murals that hint of the Renaissance.

1113 23rd St. NW. 202-293-1511. Open: for lunch Monday through Friday 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.; for dinner Monday through Thursday 5:30 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5 to 10:30 p.m., Sunday 5 to 10 p.m. All major credit cards. Entree prices: lunch \$10.95 to \$16.95, dinner \$12.95 to \$24.95.

HEE BEEN Most ethnic restaurants become less ethnic as time goes on, accommo- continued on page 26



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spectacularly successful formula for durability in a fickle business.

The Haeringer kingdom in its present form has lasted two decades now—it's been 20 years since Francois moved his restaurant from downtown Washington and transformed a combination antiques store and delicatessen into a country inn like the ones he remembered from his youth in Alsace. In that time, he has made it into a Washington institution.

There are fancier places. There are more expensive places and more ethnic places. Certainly there are more inventive places. There

may even be fresher, better places. But when Washingtonians want to celebrate a birthday or mark a wedding anniversary with a special meal, their thoughts traditionally turn to Chez Francois. For 12 years running, respondents to Washingtonian magazine's annual restaurant survey have voted it their favorite restaurant. Reservations flood in over two telephone lines, to be booked four weeks in advance on large, handwritten sheets. Francois will not take them before that. If he did, people would line up even earlier; the waiting list for choice nights rivals the one for Redskins season tickets.

Francois talks like a culinary Roland sometimes, single-handedly holding off the invading hordes of younger chefs with their artistic creations that rise high above the plate, their television appearances and wine tastings, their glossy cookbooks and novel mar-



riages of unlikely flavors from East and West. "What are all the cooks doing now? They are fiddling," he laments to a visitor. "An orange with something, and so on. That's what they are doing. A big thing sticking up, and then you look at it, and there is nothing there. Not even any taste."

Things are different chez Francois. In a deliberate, calculated, even stubborn way, this 77-year-old man is holding on to tradition. The waves

of fashion are beating around him—from nouvelle and minceur to fusion and then back to grandma's stew—but he is steadfast.

The tradition reaches back to Obernai, an Alsatian town eight miles southwest of Strasbourg. When Francois grew up there between the two wars, in a bourgeois house on the main square, the right way and the wrong way were clearer than they are now. People knew their place and they knew the rules.

His father, Francois recalls, cherished Sunday mornings with cronies at the bar. But one did not lightly shake off the obligation to go to Mass in those days. So the head of the family walked with his wife and children through the front door of the church for all to see—but then discreetly continued his march to a side door leading back outside to the bar.

And so it is that respect for form and tradition also reigns at the restaurant. All arriving employees are required to walk up to Francois and formally wish him good morning or good afternoon. In return, he formally acknowledges their greeting and reciprocates. Similarly, the entire staff sits down to dinner before beginning the evening's service. After their meal, waiters gather with the master to hear about specials and recount any complaints they have heard from customers the previous evening.

The most exacting tradition is that of cooking according to the old rules, the ones Francois learned as an apprentice in Alsace and later under one of the early star chefs, Lucien Diat at the Plaza Athenee Hotel in Paris. For him, there have been no others. "There is nothing to invent in cooking," he insists. "You just have to do well what is there."

And while it may be possible, under the new rules of the culinary game, to create an interesting sauce in a few minutes, that is certainly not the way things are done at Chez Francois.

Chun Ho, a Korean cook known around the kitchen for the last 30 years as "Mr. Ho," starts supervising a dozen bubbling stockpots in the morning hours when most Washingtonians are just sitting down to their desks. One recent day, the onion soup is underway long before noon, as is the lobster bisque. Preparing soups and sauces in the traditional manner takes all day. And as the stockpots simmer throughout the morning, Francois moves from pot to pot, overseeing the day's preparations. He inserts fatback and carrots into chunks of beef that will, after heavy-duty marinating in red wine, become the next week's boeuf à la mode.

Still hands-on after all the years at a hot stove, Francois bends over his work, moving in swift jerks, reaching up frequently with the back of his hand to push his glasses back up the bridge of his ample nose. He carves into the chunks of red meat, pops carrot

slices and pork strips into the slits and drops the result into a large, flat pan. After a dose of spices and a long splash of California burgundy, he steps back while an apprentice carries the marinade off to wait for the wine to do its magic. After a quick check on a sous-chef wrapping salmon fillets in pastry, Francois seizes his surgeon's knife and moves in to pare unsightly blood vessels from slices of foie gras that will adorn that evening's Choucroute Royale, replete with sausage, suckling pig, goose confit, duck and pheasant. The vessels spoiled the look of the swollen livers, he explains as he hacks and tugs to excise them—not only that, but they could inject an unwanted note of bitterness.

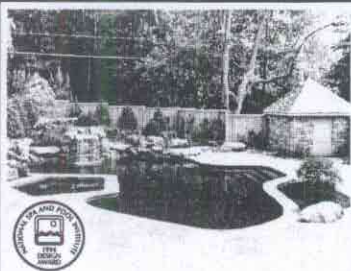
The detailed preparation for the night's service comes to a climax of sorts in the late afternoon, as it does every day, when Francois tastes and "finishes" the sauces. Into each stainless steel container of sauce, he dips a finger or a spoon, sometimes a saucer for a more generous sample. And after the taste, each sauce receives perhaps a dash of salt, some thyme, a splash of port or a bit of madeira. Or those five peppers. None is ready to leave for the dining room until Francois runs it over his tongue and pronounces a *nihil obstat*.

This entails a lot of tasting: First comes the white butter sauce for lobster, then the white sauce with Pernod for fish, the lobster sauce, the red wine and butter sauce for salmon, the white sauce for bouchee à la reine, the mushroom sauce for veal chops and crab,

Chez Francois remains a family affair. WITH FRANCOIS ARE HIS WIFE, MARIE-ANTOINETTE, WHO KEEPS THE BOOKS, AND THEIR SONS: FROM LEFT, PAUL, WHO SUPERVISES THE WINES AND DINING ROOMS; ROBERT, A CHEF; AND JACQUES, THE HEAD CHEF. OPPOSITE PAGE: THE TERRACE.

the sweet sauce with cognac for venison, the tarragon sauce for the lamb, the maitre d'hotel sauce for steak, the Perigueux sauce for the Wellington, along with standard preparations such as hollandaise and anchovy butter. "There are cooks who ask, *continued on page 42*





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biscuits and yeasty flatbread squares topped with caramelized Vidalia onions. The wine list is impressive, too, of course.

For some chefs, asparagus would be enough for an asparagus salad. Buben's also includes marinated fresh morels and a supporting cast of yellow potatoes and onions dressed with mushroom oil. A chicken club sandwich is not a matter of white bread, mayo and sliced breast meat; it's a kind of summery appetizer napoleon with paper-thin sheets of crisp dough layering the chicken, vegetables and a touch of ham—not with gravy, but red-eye vinaigrette.

These days you can rate Southern restaurants by their shrimp with grits, and Vidalia's are top-notch, with shrimp that taste sea-fresh and firm rather than mushy and grits that nearly melt into a puddle but have the crunch of stone-ground coarseness. The other entrees have seductive side dishes, too: turnip gratin and Swiss chard with walnuts accompanying the liver, onion-dusted chips beside the swordfish club, a grits cake nuzzling the seared salmon, and garlic mashed potatoes, glazed parsnips, kale and carrots surrounding short ribs. This is a restaurant where I might be compelled to order a vegetable plate.

It's also a restaurant where I would undoubtedly save room for dessert—or make-room if I hadn't saved any. The creme brulee is as close to perfect as vanilla-scented custard and crackly caramelized sugar could dream of becoming. And the season's fruits find their way into crisps, shortcakes and tarts—even sometimes into the creme brulee. Vidalia is the kind of restaurant where you find yourself checking out the lunch menu as you groan your way out of the dining room after dinner.

1990 M St. NW. 202-659-1990. Open: for lunch Monday through Friday 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; for dinner Monday through Thursday 5:30 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. Closed Sunday. All major credit cards. Entree prices: lunch \$13.25 to \$17.50, dinner \$18.25 to \$22. ■

SOLUTION TO LAST WEEK'S PUZZLE

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ORIBI	ALME	HOLE	
PAULO	OSIER	PIRATE	
AMERCE	SITON	CANA	
HORDE	SILENT	VOCAL	RAM
ANTS	ACME	OREL	ZERO
BTU	SQUARE	ROUND	CAJUN
RIEPA	DS	AEDS	SHIFST
HUBBUBS	ASPO	T	STAR
AMCONA	STEER	AMULET	
BLANK	SWELL	SHRINK	ARI
LILY	GOAT	EATS	TWIG
ATM	NEGLECT	CARE	TRACE
SHANDY	BLURT	BRAID	
LEVIEE	ALDO	LATIN	
LOWERRAISE	LOOSE	TEKSE	
APERS	KATE	ELSE	RIITA
PERT	AMEN	RIEED	SIPAR

CHEZ FRANCOIS

continued from page 23

Why all this crap?" Francois sneers as he goes about the daily ritual. "Excuse the expression. But this is cooking. And it's why I still exist."

From France comes the news that the great chefs are in trouble in the land of their birth. The astronomical cost of producing flawless food pushes prices beyond the reach and interest of even Europe's wealthiest and most discriminating diners. And some begin to wonder if a meal is worth all the fuss and expense. Reserve months in advance for the right to pay \$300 a head to eat something too refined to recognize as food?

A haute crisis, but not in Great Falls. Francois wags his goatee, saying he told them so, that he warned them they were straying too far from the basics. "All that is going to finish one day," he explains. "Listen, when people go to the restaurant, what do they want? A good time. A nice atmosphere. A good meal. It's simple."

Well, not so simple. L'Auberge Chez Francois has not been the only candidate for Washington's favorite special-occasion restaurant. Other great eating places have flourished over the years. The recently defunct Jean-Louis at the Watergate served Washington diners an ambitious local version of the haute cuisine that vies for stars and toques in France. Another contender, the Inn at Little Washington, seems closer to the pattern set by Chez Francois over the last two decades. Chef Patrick O'Connell may not be from the Old Country, but he clearly has Francois' passion for great food and the devotion to detail that puts it on the plate. This is no accident: O'Connell and his partner, Reinhardt Lynch, spent close to a year at Chez Francois soon after it opened, learning to wield the spatula and many other things. "We felt it would be the best place that we could be," O'Connell recalls, "and it certainly was. He's a fabulous teacher. People learn a lot more than just about cooking from him."

Despite his age, Francois shows up at his restaurant every day, driving over from his home nearby. Except on Mondays, when the restaurant is closed, he starts his kitchen rounds at 11 a.m., a couple of hours after Mr. Ho gets the stocks started. Dressed like his entire staff in the traditional white tunic over small-checked black and white trousers, carrying a little towel to wipe and clean, Francois carves, tastes, shouts, cajoles, checks, demonstrates, remonstrates, congratulates, pours, sprinkles, rejects, accepts and generally goes about the business of being a chef.

Only when the sauces have all passed inspection, the wait staff has received march-

ing orders and the dinners are ready to be put on the stove does Francois go home. As the diners start to arrive, he leaves the family enterprise in the hands of his sons: Jacques, 46, the head chef and heir apparent; Robert, 45, also a chef; and Paul, 42, who supervises the wines and four dining rooms. His wife of nearly half a century, Marie-Antoinette, does the books.

Francois still cooks the way he was taught a long time ago—and not at some culinary institute where everyone wears a tall white hat from the very first day. Francois began his apprenticeship at 16 near home at L'Hotel Chambard in Kaysersberg. The regimen for a callow beginner in those days meant rising before dawn to fire up the stove and clean out the ashes. It meant scrubbing pots, swabbing the floor and peeling the potatoes. After three years, he graduated to the big leagues: the Plaza Athenee. Then came the war, when Francois was pressed into service cooking for French officers. Soon, however, he was taken prisoner—and again pressed into service cooking, this time for German officers at the Four Seasons Hotel in Munich.

At war's end, Francois came to Washington to join his brother Alfred at Haeringer's Buffeteria on 14th Street. It was a far cry from the Plaza Athenee and the Champs Elysees. But Francois moved swiftly—to the Chevy Chase Club, then, briefly, to an Alaskan resort, eventually becoming the chef at the Three Musketeers restaurant in downtown Washington. By 1954, he'd bought the restaurant, changed its name to Chez Francois and launched a career. On his first menu, Long Island duckling in orange sauce went for \$3.35.

The formula established by Francois and drummed into his sons and employees has remained the same over the years: good food, good atmosphere, good prices. "Once in a while, my sons want to change things," Francois acknowledges over a late-afternoon lunch with his sons by his side. "But why change things that work?"

In many ways, Francois has grown along with Washington's eating public. When he began, few Americans were acquainted with grand cuisine in the French manner, and it was not unheard of for customers to order coffee or a Coke with their meals. Now the choice is more likely to be between a French bordeaux and a California merlot. Francois vows that customers in his restaurant will always be treated well—regardless of whatever bad dining habits they bring to the table. "When people come, they come to relax," he says. "They don't want to be made to look stupid. You have to work at that. You have to make sure the waiters are not too stiff." So if someone wants his trout amandine with almond flour but not the ac-

companying wheat flour, that's fine. If someone else wants her salad after the main course, as French eaters mostly do, that's fine—but otherwise Americans can have it when they expect it, between the first and second courses. And sweetbreads may not be what American diners are used to, so Francois does bouchee à la reine without them. "The rule is, leave them in peace."

It is not by accident that the Chez Francois cookbook was written by eldest son Jacques. Or that Jacques presides over Chez Francois cooking lessons and carries the family name to wine tastings. Or that greeting the customers is pretty much left to Paul. One of the rules of cooking picked up by Francois Haeringer over the years says a chef stays in the kitchen—his own kitchen—and leaves the media appearances to movie stars or politicians. Another says a chef does his own cooking, that grand concepts left behind for others to execute day in and day out do not a grand restaurant make.

Maintaining these traditions at L'Auberge Chez Francois has come at the expense of some tension between father and sons. The time is long past when they were boys. They are grown men now, and each is an able restaurateur in his own right. Jacques runs the kitchen every evening, but Francois' personality seems to fill the whole enterprise so completely there is little room for those of others. "Dad has a saying," Jacques says with a resigned smile. "He says, there is only one way—that's my way."

The marketing exploits of competitor chefs here and abroad tempt Jacques, who says public relations would be good for business. "He wants to show off more. I don't want to," retorts the father, as if that settles it. Stoooped with age and slow in bending over, Francois seems to sense that his battle to preserve a tradition must come to an end someday, that his sons will eventually take charge.

After resisting for months, he recently gave in and allowed them to install the restaurant's first computerized billing and inventory system. But it seemed somehow like a dereliction of duty. Hadn't Marie-Antoinette been keeping track all these years? "They want to bring in a manager and go off to Bora-Bora," he says dismissively of his sons, even while admitting they were right about the computer. "They would like to see me retire, so they could do what they want to. They deny it, but it's really on their mind."

But there are no plans for that yet, and L'Auberge Chez Francois seems secure in its ways for another 20 years. "As long as I am here, yes," the old man says. "When I am gone, who knows?" ■

Edward Cody is a deputy foreign editor of The Post.

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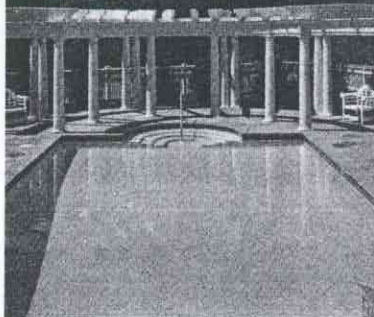
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