

Dear Js,

3/25/75

You may not have noticed the Sunday Post's story on the closing of Chez Francois (3/23/75). Reminds me of how important Francois may have been to me in the public appearances I have made.

He was a friend, had visited us at the farm from time to time, ate our produce personally and bought specialty items for the restaurant, like geese.

There came a time when I had it arranged through a friend to appear on my first talk show, then run by a Steve Allison in Washington. (He died in LA several years ago.) After it was arranged I was warned he was a people eater.

That particular appearance was for a Saturday night.

That particular day I had gotten an urgent phone call from a New American Library vice president Ed Kuhn, for a copy of Whitewash, not then out long. So, the only fast way to get it to him was via Washington. I was thus there hours before the show began. Naturally I wandered over to have a drink with Francois. (I intended doing no eating to be alert, the lean-and-hungry side.)

As we chatted Francois learned my purpose and was excited. Seems like he was a fan of Allison's. Confirmed that he was also a tough one.

It was a slow day in the restaurant so we were in his office. I'd sit and drink when he had to leave on business on the floor or in the kitchen. I also relaxed a bit, having been pretty thoroughly scared. I don't think I'd even listened to a talk show until then. The man who arranged it was then Brentano's Washington manager. (But they would not let him sell the book!)

I kept declining to eat and paying less and less attention to what was going on around me. This included a waitress napkinning Francois' desk. By the time he told me that he was just having a little something brought in for me because the show ran so late and a little, just a wee little, would tide me over without stuffing me, my resolve not to eat was gone. And I was rather mellow, if not drunk.

Had I not been I doubt I'd have eaten those snails. I've been hooked on them since.

Before it was over Francois had stuffed me and I was not protesting. I was also relaxed and instead of being drunk merely had a slight edge. It was exactly the right condition for my first talk show and with a man who without doubt was one of the toughest and least inhibited.

From then on I was never afraid of any show, any odds on them, any host, and I did all the roughest, with the worst kinds of gangups. I was also in the proper condition to learn from the initial experience, proper state of mind. Had my state of mind and well-being been otherwise I think the results could have been. Allison was what he was reputed to be but I was un intimidated and enough uninhibited to come out fine and for him to want me thereafter. In fact, later he backed off when I got angry over the show on The Scavengers.

I owe much to Francois, more than free meals and bottles of wine when I was there with others, etc. Once when I was there with Ramparts people I didn't even see Francois but there were these little courtesies that impressed the Rampartsers. I remember Welch and Penn Jones and I think Mark Stone, Iszy's brother. And bottles of wine before we ordered them.

Had I had a different experience with Allison there might have been different results to the two very rough New York shows that I think broke the subject open, Long John Nebel's and the Lane/Holt, Rinehart loaded Alan Burke show.

Francois always had a country place in Virginia, unlike what the story suggests. I supplied him with my special ducks for it. He paid me back well and many times over.

Au Revoir, Chez Francois: One Less Washington

By William Rice

Sometime soon, when spring lures office-dwellers outside for luncheon or a late afternoon drink, a number of people are going to realize Washington has been deprived of an institution. There will be no more terrace at Chez Francois. There will, in fact, be no more Chez Francois after April 12.

In the name of progress, an erratic and sometimes dubious justification for change, it has been determined that downtown is to have one more office building and one less restaurant.

The hotel and townhouses near Farragut Square to be replaced by the new building have been ruled expendable despite the upcoming Bicentennial.

The restaurant? In a city where French restaurants seem to sprout in bunches instead of being nurtured individually, it should be easy to replace. But economics and human nature indicate otherwise. Chez Francois, as unpretentious and single-minded as its owner, is not likely to be duplicated.

Francois Haeringer, the intense Alsatian who built the eating place that bears his name, summed up the squeeze faced by a restaura-

rateur going into a new building here after he announced his closing several weeks ago. "We have had one main asset," he said, "a good meal that isn't too expensive. If I move into a new building downtown, I can't keep that. The rent per square foot they ask is ridiculous. To pay that rent I couldn't keep my prices. I couldn't have the same style place. I want to continue to treat my customers in the same way. I couldn't do that anymore downtown."

Thus Haeringer plans to leave town and open a country-style restaurant in Great Falls, Va., near Reston.

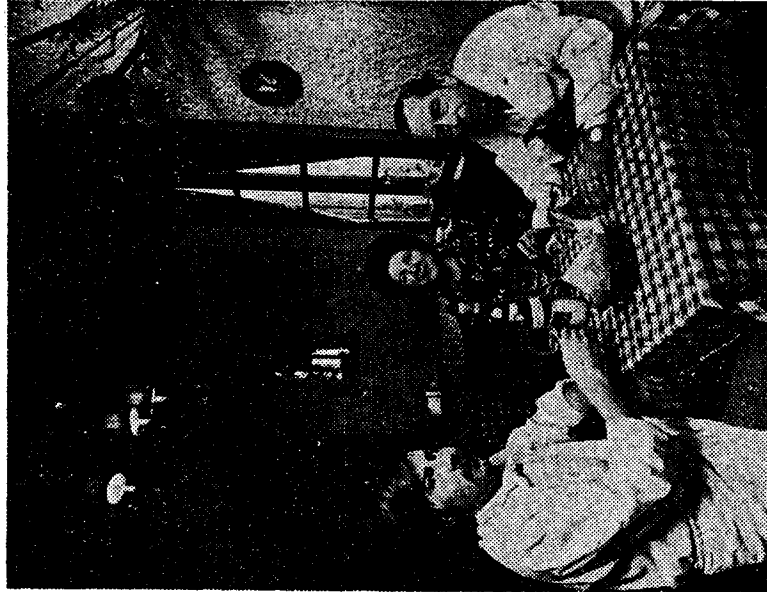
Whatever comes after him, if there is a restaurant in the new building, will be less ambitious, more expensive or both and the fragrant odors of Washington's best *choucroute garni* of quiche or plum tart will continue to waft toward Connecticut Avenue only in the memories of passersby.

To keep the record straight, Chez Francois has never been the only French restaurant in Washington, in many minds, has it been the best. Serving 500 meals a day or more from an extensive menu, Haeringer, or anyone else, had to come up with some mediocre meals and some mundane dishes. But the cause was

human failing, not cynical disinterest in quality or blind pursuit of profit.

Haeringer has admitted that the restaurant he took over in 1954 got out of hand. It had been called the Three Musketeers. Francois, a chef who came to the United States in 1948, redecorated the place in the style of an Alsace village. It was pretty, tidy and welcoming, seating 75 snugly. Situated on the short block of Connecticut between Farragut Square and Lafayette Park, it became a rendezvous for government officials and diplomats.

In 1959 Chez Francois expanded by absorbing the King Cole Room next door. More stylish (and more expensive) French restaurants lured away celebrities during the '60s, but Haeringer appeared to take no notice. He is a shy man who prefers working in his kitchen to mingling in the dining room. Therefore, for some years the public mistakenly thought "Francois" was an elderly man with upturned mustaches who wandered through the dining room each day greeting customers. It was instead a family friend, a retired chef named Claude "Papa" Jarret.



By Linda Wheeler—The Washington Post
Francois Haeringer, right, wife, Marie Antoinette, son Jacques at Chez Francois.

Steady customers, "a good, middle-class group," tourists and young people kept business brisk. They found a varied menu of full fine recipes from Alsace, three or four specials that

changed daily and one of the city's most extensive and reasonably priced wine lists. Serving was by waitresses in native costume and hostesses patrolled dining areas decorated with Alsatian craftwork. Fish swam in tanks below pots of flow-ers. It was all done on a human scale, tinged with warmth and people responded to that.

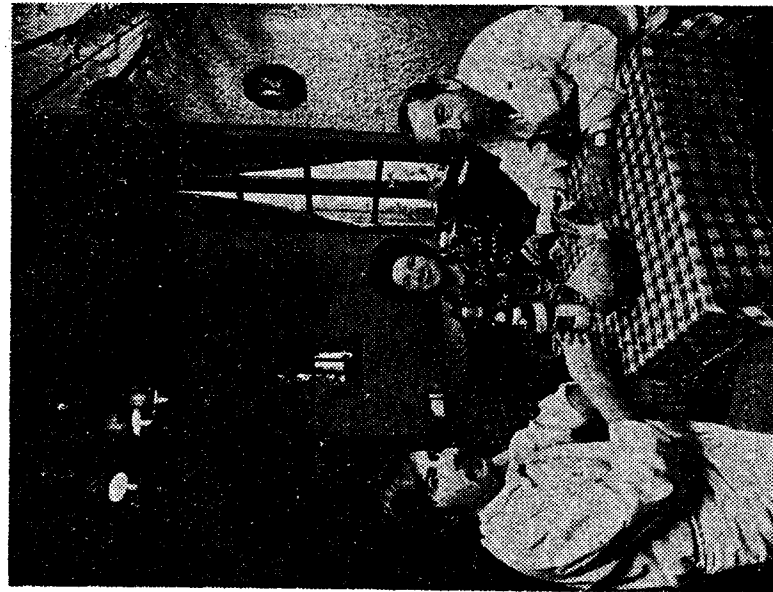
In 1968, Haeringer built a second-floor addition that raised his seating total to over 225. It was styled an "auberge," a country inn, and its handcrafted design and imported tiles represented the concept he hopes to realize more fully in Great Falls.

The bar space was useful. Chez Francois takes no reservations for luncheon and is often backed up in the evenings. But his staff expanded as well, to more than 90. A traditionalist who began work in the trade at 14, Haeringer has little sympathy with the current work ethic. Time and again in conversation he returns to the subject. "Someone has to do the little things," he said to an interviewer several years ago. "We must find a way to make people proud to work in a trade. Not everyone can go to uni-

Chez Francois: One Less Washington Restaurant

human failing, not cynical disinterest in quality or blind pursuit of profit. Haeringer has admitted that the restaurant he took over in 1954 got out of hand. It had been called the Three Musketeers. Francois, a chef who came to the United States in 1948, redecorated the place in the style of an Alsace village. It was pretty, tidy and welcoming, seating 75 snugly. Situated on the short block of Connecticut between Farragut Square and Lafayette Park, it became a rendezvous for government officials and diplomats.

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versity and earn a big salary." The personal example he set didn't rub off altogether, and while customers kept coming even when prices were forced upward the frustrations seemed to grow apace.

About two years ago his desire to find an alternative, plus a feeling that the Claridge Hotel, in which Chez Francois is housed, was doomed, led him to buy a commercial property on Springvale Road, a rural setting in Great Falls on the Virginia side of the Potomac near River Bend.

The new restaurant, he insists, will be rustic, small and spacious, seating only 75 to 100. It may be open only for dinner during the week and will have a staff handpicked from his present crew. A second Haeringer is expected to be on duty in the kitchen. Jacques, Francois' eldest son at 24, trained at restaurants and bakeries in France after obtaining a degree from the University of Richmond. Fresh fish dishes and omelets should be among the featured dishes.

As a member of the "old guard" of Washington restaurateurs and their Epicurian Club, Haeringer tried

to build a bridge to the new generation of French chefs whose restaurants have opened in the past 10 years.

He failed. The chefs preferred to stick with their own organization, the Amicale Culinnaire. The 56-year-old Haeringer, who holds the French government's agricultural medal of merit, is carefully invited to their functions but represents another generation to many.

Now that his initial plan to operate both a country and city restaurant for a time is gone, Haeringer will push ahead in hopes of opening his auberge in the fall. He is already fretting about stocking proper wines, about holding help until he can open and the details of construction. "I'll have something no one else has again," he commented last week.

The final two weeks of Chez Francois will be something of a running farewell party. The move thereafter isn't far. The site of the new restaurant is off Route 7, about 10 minutes beyond the Beltway.

But to those who glance into the hole in the ground near Farragut Square on their way to lunch next fall, it may seem a very long way indeed.