



LOCAL LANDMARK

Félicitations à Chez François

PART 1: HUMBLE BEGINNINGS OF A COUNTRY INN | BY KAREN WASHBURN

Above, left: François and son Jacques in front of Aux Trois Mousquetaires where François was a chef c. 1953; and Chez François in the Claridge Hotel, 818 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D.C.

Opposite, left: François in the dining room of the original Chez François in 1964; and Chez François sidewalk cafe on 818 Connecticut Avenue

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary for L'Auberge Chez François, which also has the distinction of being the oldest restaurant in Great Falls. This landmark establishment has long been a destination for many diners throughout the Washington metropolitan area since it moved to Great Falls from Washington, D.C., in 1976. Many patrons view it as absolutely the best place to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, graduations or any other important life events. Its longevity is no small accomplishment in an era when restaurants open with great fanfare, enjoy fleeting popularity and then close within a few years.

The half-timbered, whitewashed building trimmed with red accents, stained glass windows and bright flowers, is the quintessential French country inn. The unpretentious front porch, furnished with vintage benches and a red carpet, establishes the mood for the quiet ambience inside. Through the arched front door, the visitor is greeted in a lobby filled with antiques, an aquarium with tropical fish and a large raised fireplace. The half-timbered style is repeated in all four dining rooms, which are furnished and accessorized with a large and unique collection of heirloom dishes, copper and art. A very profes-

sional wait staff, uniformly attired in red vests, provides excellent service. The quality of the meals presented certainly exceeds the modern definition of comfort food, but the entire atmosphere, combined with the viands available, translates to an experience of comfort and celebration extraordinaire.

This gem of a country inn is the vibrant legacy of its founder Chef François Haeringer, who passed away in 2010 at the age of 91. Chez François is the culmination of his lifelong dream to own a family-operated country inn to serve Alsatian French-style food without pretension and at affordable prices. His standards were exacting. He had spent a lifetime learning the business from the kitchen floor up and believed there was only one way to achieve excellence. In a 1987 *Washington Post* interview, François claimed, "To be a chef, you have to learn. You have to learn to wash dishes first, to peel potatoes first, to clean the stove first, to clean the pots first."

François was born in 1919 in the Alsatian town of Obernai, France. Alsace was a region well-known for wine, beer and food production, and good cooking was regarded as a necessary art. The region had just been



returned to France from Germany at the close of World War I. Numerous members of François's family were involved in food production. They had a butcher shop, a charcuterie and a patisserie. François's Uncle Jacques was a chef who trained with the renowned Chef Auguste Escoffier, and his older brother Alfred was also a chef. His mother, a homemaker, spent many hours every day in the kitchen preparing meals for her family. Given his heritage, it is not surprising that he developed his love of cooking almost from birth.

Formal training for François began when he was apprenticed at age 16 in the kitchen at L'Hotel Chambard in Kaysersberg. That experience impressed on him that to be a good chef, one must learn how to do anything and everything related to food preparation. It was brutally hard work that started about five a.m. He cleaned the stove, a task that required him to scrape out the coal ashes. Then he hauled in more coal and started a new fire. Next he was charged with taking the ashes to the wine cellar and sprinkling them over the bottles so it would appear that the wine had been around long enough for the bottles to get dusty. Before his day was over, he would scrub pots, wash dishes, mop the floor, peel potatoes and clean vegetables. After three years of hard training, he was ready for a new job in the kitchen of famed Chef Lucien Diat in the Plaza Athénée in Paris.

When World War II started, François joined the French army and cooked for the officers. After the Germans captured France, he was taken prisoner, and his cooking skill may have saved his life. Instead of being forced to fight for the

Germans on the Eastern front, as most Alsatians were, he was sent to the Four Seasons Hotel in Munich to work with the well-known German chef Alfred Walterspiel. Guarded by the Gestapo, François had to cook for all of the high-ranking Nazis, including Hitler. It was an exacting task and carried a bit more risk than normal restaurant cooking.

When the war was over, François turned to seasonal work. During the summer months, he cooked at resorts on the French coast and then moved to the mountains during ski season. France had been decimated by the fighting during the war, and food was still in short supply, which made it difficult to offer a menu with variety.

François met his future wife, Marie Antoinette, who passed away this June, when he was chef at a hotel in the Pyrenees and she was working at the front desk and doing bookkeeping. They married in 1948. Tired of the deprivations caused by the war and lured by glowing reports of a land of plenty from François's Uncle Jacques and brother Alfred, the couple decided to immigrate to America. Both Jacques and Alfred were already successful restaurateurs in the nation's capital. The Haeringers settled in the District of Columbia, and François went to work for Alfred at Haeringer's Buffeteria, a restaurant that was actually a cafeteria boasting the novel addition of a salad bar. And while it needed cooks to operate, there was no opportunity for a French chef to show off his style. So Haeringer moved on to work for his Uncle Jacques, who was head chef at the Chevy Chase Club.

Communication was a significant problem

at the club—most of the kitchen staff was Italian. François, bilingual in Alsatian and French, did not speak English or Italian. And even though he was young, he had definite ideas about how to run a kitchen. So did his uncle. As son Jacques later said, "They didn't get along. What a surprise! Two hard-headed Alsatians, and they didn't get along."

After a brief time in Ketchikan, Alaska, where François cooked at a local hotel, the Haeringers returned to the District of Columbia, and François became the chef at the Three Musketeers (Aux Trois Mousquetaires), a medium-priced French restaurant in the Claridge Hotel on Connecticut Avenue. When the owner decided to retire, François bought the Three Musketeers, reopening it in 1954 as Chez François.

François immediately set out to make his dream a reality—providing good Alsatian French meals at an affordable price in a comfortable but unpretentious atmosphere—a fairly ambitious project for the city at that time.

In spite of the huge population growth brought about by World War II, Washington, D.C. was still very much a small southern city. There were numerous restaurants, steak houses, sandwich shops, cafeterias and drugstore lunch counters, but fine dining was almost a foreign concept.

Most of the hotels had restaurants, and so did the bus stations and airport. Travelers had to be able to eat. The lunch trade was stronger than the dinner market because many area residents viewed going to a restaurant for dinner as something to be reserved for a special occasion. There were numerous plain and simple establish-



ments of fewer than ten tables that served sandwiches or a heavier meal of meat or fried chicken, potatoes, a vegetable and limited pies or cakes for dessert. The average price of a meal was 60 cents. Dinners in better establishments cost about 75 cents for a chicken dinner, while filet mignon was \$2.50, sirloin was \$2.75, and chopped tenderloin was \$1.

The prevailing attitude of middle-class diners regarding French restaurants was fairly negative. They believed that the title implied aloof and intimidating waiters presenting a menu in a language that they couldn't read or understand in a hushed and sterile atmosphere. And to top it off, this torture would all cost more than they could afford. François set out to break this concept with the opening of his own restaurant.

Planned in a style of a brasserie, the new restaurant was furnished like a French country inn with simple wooden chairs and tables covered in checked tablecloths. The walls were decorated with prints and paintings of François's home town of Obernai, vintage copper pots and pans and other antiques. The effect was comfortable and homey. The staff was not in the least intimidating, as Chez François was an equal opportunity employer long before it was a requirement. Most of the wait staff were women—Americans and natives of other countries—dressed in skirts, white blouses and full aprons in bright prints. The kitchen staff was also diverse.

Atmosphere and service taken care of, the last major challenge for the chef was the menu. For generations, Americans had been meat, gravy and potato diners. Vegetables were usually overcooked until they became pasty and soggy.

Salads consisted of lettuce, tomatoes and cucumbers or some type of Jell-O mold for special occasions. None of it was particularly imaginative, and while green vegetables might make it to the plate, they were often carried back into the kitchen when the meal was over.

François was determined to introduce his customers to the foods of Alsace. Due to its location, the restaurant had the potential to attract international patrons, but what about the Americans? It helped that so many Washingtonians had served overseas during World War II and might be more adventurous in trying new dishes. Beverages presented another conundrum. Most might enjoy a pre-dinner cocktail or two, but it was a standing joke that with dinner the girls would drink coffee and the boys would drink Coca Cola. Among other things, the chef would have to introduce them to wine. Wine was not popular at the time and was only available in limited varieties. What's more, good wine could be hard to locate.

Wine wasn't the only challenge for the restaurant—many spices and garnishes were not readily available from local suppliers. In the beginning, François went to the 5th Street Market every morning to see what meats and vegetables were on hand so he could plan his menu. But to create the classic dishes he wanted to cook, he had to send far away for some of the ingredients. Shallots could only be found in a dried form. Sole and frog legs had to be purchased frozen.

Supply problems notwithstanding, the restaurant opened with a full menu of Alsatian French dishes. A four-course meal was offered at prices ranging between \$3 and \$4.50. The ap-

petizers included pâté, salmon fumé, onion soup or vichyssoise. Snails, oysters and shrimp cocktails were all extra. Main course offerings were scallops, filet of sole, lobster, veal scalloppini, coq au vin, ham, Rock Cornish hen, duckling, lamb chops and a selection of beef steaks. For the more adventurous diner, there were frog legs, calf's brain, smoked beef tongue, veal kidneys, calf's liver and sweetbreads.

All of these dishes were garnished and sauced with François's special recipes and accompanied by fresh vegetables prepared in his own style, blanched and lightly sautéed, not cooked to a mush. A salad course, with his special signature vinaigrette, and lovely fresh bread and butter were included in the price. The dessert menu was equally impressive with cakes, tarts, fruit in wine, chocolate mousse or meringues. Patrons could also order a cheese plate to finish off a meal for only 50 cents more.

Open for lunch and dinner, the restaurant was a success. Customers loved the food and the atmosphere, and all 85 seats were usually occupied with a line of people waiting to be seated. Through the years, as more space in the hotel became available, Chez François expanded and ultimately could seat 250. Even then there were lines of hungry customers that were willing to wait for a table.

Times had changed and a new generation viewed dining in restaurants as a normal weekly occurrence. The advent of the credit card also was a boost to business. By 1970, over fifty percent of the customers paid with credit cards. In an interview, François said, "People don't want to carry cash. To lay out \$25 in cash is much less



Above: Jacques, Marie Antoinette and François Haeringer, Chez François, Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D. C.

Opposite, left: standing, left to right: Paul Haeringer, office manager Frieda Bene, Robert Haeringer and Jacques Haeringer; seated: François Haeringer and Marie-Antoinette Haeringer; and Lassie dining at Chez François, Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D. C. in 1969

conducive to spending than signing for it and worrying later.”

François opened a sidewalk cafe in 1962. He was the second restaurateur in the city to offer outdoor dining, and the venture was an instant hit. People loved to sit outside with a glass of wine or a drink, even if they planned to dine inside later, and watch the world go by. As the reputation of the restaurant grew, the customer base of locals and tourists also included politicians, senators, congressmen, newscasters and movie and sports stars.

The most unusual guest of all was a canine movie star in 1969. The collie then cast in the role of Lassie was in town with his trainer Rudd Weatherwax who invited Elinor Lee and Lawrence Laurent of *The Washington*

Post to join them for lunch on Chez François’s outdoor terrace. In this case, François waived his policy of requiring his staff to allow the famous to dine anonymously. They all gathered to watch Lassie exhibit the best of table manners. He was seated on a chair with a stool under the table to support his front feet. Garbed in a lobster bib to protect his beautiful flowing fur, he delicately ate beef bourguignon spoon-fed to him by Elinor Lee.

As successful as the restaurant was, it still didn’t fulfill François’s dream of a country inn. And not one to give up on his ideas, when outside forces dictated a move, he seized the chance to make his dream a reality. *é*

Next time: Chez François moves to the country.