

What If?

BY JEAN MURRAY HAWKES '36

What if I were to recycle myself as a gourmet chef? The idea first surfaced as I listened to a waiter describing “specials” on a menu. So contrived and confusing were they, not to mention innovative, that my taste buds developed terminal discombobulation as I listened. Often these taste-twisters are bewildering to the brain as well as to the tongue. When ginger and giblets are mentioned in the same breath, or scallions and strawberries, or white wine and black beans, my mental heartburn is raging full-blown before the plate is set before me.



Take mackerel—not everyone’s favorite fish. My husband and I used to fish often, and during mackerel season we enjoyed the fish several times a week. Our maxim for preparing all fish was, “You can fry it, or you can ruin it.” Occasionally I ruined it (and we liked it) and often I fried it, and we liked that, too, but it was a little monotonous.

Then I saw it on the menu at Commander’s Palace in New Orleans. There it was, in black and white, on a prestigious six-page parchment menu—Mackerel Maximilian. Same stodgy old fish, but with a glamorous and polysyllabic title. I postulated, in my mind, its preparation. They would start with a young fish from the Bay of Fundy, (in Maine, just to be difficult) and marinate it in onion soup concentrate for one hour. Then it would be anointed with ground cloves and lemon zest, wrapped in palm fronds, baked over hickory coals, and served over angel-hair pasta with a sprinkling of coriander and toasted sesame seeds, and anything else they had in the kitchen which had not yet been incorporated. I put the mental Mackerel Maximilian on hold, and ordered Eggs Benedict.

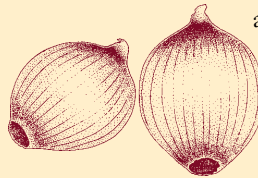
But in a desultory fashion, I have continued to contemplate this new career. I would just be open on Thursday, because it almost rhymes with gourmet. Gurrmet. Thursrday. Thursrday. Gurrmet. I could already imagine catchy jingles using the euphonious juxtaposition of the two words in radio and TV ads. How could this fail?



Here’s the deal. Every Thursday I would cook something fragrant and irresistibly delectable in fairly large volume, pipe the aroma outside, thus luring customers (or victims) to buy it for a take-out dinner. And if it was palatable, they would return next week. And if it didn’t sell, I would have enough for my dinner for at least a week.

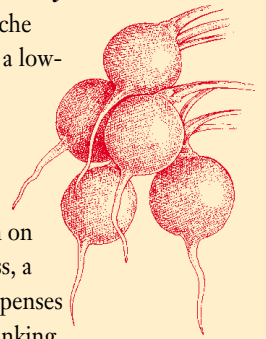


Of course, I would need cooking lessons to learn to become a more disciplined cook. At present, when I embark on a new recipe, I just may omit some of the ingredients. If the recipe calls for something not in my pantry, and it is only 1/2 teaspoon in eight cups of glop, who will miss it? And I am not always precise or reliable about the length of time I marinate or simmer or beat or “set aside to thicken.” The prosaic plan would be to go to the Culinary Institute of America, or Johnson and Wales, highly reputable and certified establishments, but perhaps that’s too pragmatic. A more attractive, and shorter, prospect would be a cruise, during which I would learn how to prepare fancy dishes en route to Martinique or Bora Bora. Recently I read of a cooking experience available in France. One signs up for three weeks, and stays in a quaint *pension*, absorbing cooking lore from 9 to 1. Afternoons are free to loaf or sightsee or to eat one’s creations. On completion of the course, one returns to one’s native heath well rounded and with tasty new talents.



Thursday Gourmet would tempt customers with trendy and mouth-watering titles, as well as aromas. Heading the list would be Jean’s Beans. A slice of spinach quiche would be a Veg-Wedge, and a low-cholesterol meat dish would be Fake Steak. How could hungry gourmands resist?

I will need to get a license, and a location, and some industrial-size pots and spoons. High on my shopping list will be that hallmark of success, a machine that says, “TAKE A NUMBER” and dispenses wisps of paper to the clamorous throng. I’m thinking BIG. Small Business Administration, here I come!



Jean Murray Hawkes '36 is a retired physician and full-time food lover.