

A Frog turns into a Steve Poses...

By Barbara Ann Rosenberg

Remember the '70's—When Philadelphia underwent the so-called "Restaurant Renaissance?" When the perception of Philadelphia metamorphosed from culinary wasteland to a serious contender as a major player on the national restaurant scene?..When some wag described predominant contemporary cooking styles as "Italian, French, Chinese...and Philadelphia?" Have you ever stopped to ponder "Whatever happened to (fill in the blanks with any number of names that were "hot" then)???? Well, stay tuned—this irregularly recurring "Nostalgia" column will keep you filled in on the vagaries of the folks who made the difference in those dear, departed exciting '70's—the restaurateurs who put Philadelphia on every dedicated "foodies" map. And find out what those movers and shakers are up to now. Most of them, incidentally, are still "into" food in one way or another. Some have made radical style changes—some have "hung in there" without major metamorphosis. In any event, we'll check them out and give you an update.

Chef/guru Steve Poses, first made his mark on the (then) emerging restaurant scene in 1973 with (then) avant guard "fusion" cuisine as practiced at his funky little Frog bistro on 16th Street. Frog was the place that titillated Philadelphians' relatively innocent palates with lemon grass and galanga and other mysterious flavors that Poses encountered during his dealings with his newly immigrated Asian kitchen staff and intuitively decided to incorporate into the excitingly "different" food he was creating for his "eager-for-new taste-experiences," primarily urban clientele. His equally innovative Commissary Cafeteria opened in 1977 as another of Poses' contributions to his urban community, redefining what a fast meal could be with some imagination applied. Poses had studied Urban Planning at Penn and views restaurants as neighborhood "meeting places"...enhancing the quality of urban life.

"In the '60's people had begun to travel and were returning to the United

States with a sense of adventure about food and we were creating dishes to feed their sense of adventure as well as their bodies," is the way Poses describes his early efforts in the restaurant business. In other words, Poses was a pioneer in the field of evolving flavor combinations.

trade and notes that, by and large, people are fickle, particularly about where they go out to eat. "They always want to go to what's new and hot,—and, by definition, you can't sustain newness forever—so people move on."

In the '80's Poses recalls that his cus-



"You can always tell a pioneer," says Poses wryly. "He's the one with the arrows in his back." Poses has not lost his sense of humor in spite of the many turns and twists of fate and its effect on his business in the past twenty-something years. "I'm hanging in there—still trying to make a buck" he says of his current business as a caterer. Called (what else?) Frog/Commissary Caterers (for his first two restaurants), Poses' enterprise routinely mounts, according to his estimate, "600 to 700 events a year." Frog/Commissary Caterers feeds people as the exclusive caterer at such locations as Independence Seaport Museum, the Franklin Institute—and a couple of years ago "cautiously" entered the field of Kosher catering with an enterprise called Noah's Kitchen named for his son.

"Catering was always, our best business" says Poses..."even when we were running one or more restaurants." (He did his first catering job in 1976, he says.) Actually, evaluating the food delivery scene, Poses comments, "Catering is an inherently better business." He reminisces about when he was in the "high fashion" end of restaurant

tomers "went from blue jeans to designer jeans." He had outgrown the kitchen at 16th Street, Frog, and he moved to more upscale "digs on Locust Street, renaming the restaurant, as befitting his fancier venue, "Frog...only with double dots over the 'o," giving it a more European twist. "We bought the building and renovated it and tried to fill it with lovely artwork...to continue the evolution of our enterprise." He also opened City Bites in a huge space on 2nd Street across from Ritz Five Movie Theater. "In the four years we operated City Bites we lost everything it had taken us ten years to build up. The space was too big for us from Sunday through Thursday and not big enough for Friday and Saturday." He concludes, "the equation just didn't work for us."

On the other hand, Poses reflects on the fact that catering is more stable—there's a reward for experience and longevity. "The rewards build (as long as you stay fresh"—and you establish more continuing relationships). "In fact, he continues, about 65% of our business is corporate and repeat. So, in that way, catering is fundamentally better than the restaurant business."

Poses credits the Pennsylvania Convention Center with an upswing in the catering field these days. "While we can't actually cater on site there because there's an official caterer for the Center - and it is *not* Frog/Commissary," Poses says. He explains the changes that resulted in improving his business: "Conventioneers get tired of eating all their meals in the same location and the planners have started to look for new tastes and new venues for their events." Consequently, Poses notes that he is able to provide meals overlooking the Delaware at the new Independence Seaport Museum, for example, or at The Colonial Dames and other locations around town that give people some insight into the different facets of Philadelphia while they're visiting. "While it wasn't the case when The Convention Center was brand new and everyone was curious about it, it was actually more of a competitor, but now it's having an impact on our business in a positive way."

Poses admits to being totally comfortable in his present role as a caterer but he recalls, "We didn't have the financial resources to weather the changing storm in the '80's - the direction of Center City was changing and The Four Seasons came to town and redefined what fine dining was all about. We kind of aspired to that standard (or something close to it) at our new Frog." He explains further, "we also didn't have the means or the depth of management sophistication we needed. . .and then, at the other end of the spectrum, Liberty Place opened down the block from the Commissary with what was essentially a 600 seat fast food restaurant. As it happened, and we had a long term lease at the Commissary that we had to live with even when we weren't making any money—the economics just weren't sound." Poses says that even after he stemmed the flow of blood, "We still had the bandages to clean up."

But, now, Steve Poses admits that he is "extremely happy" with what he's doing. He still loves creating dishes and feeding people—and he feels now he's found a way to do it that makes financial and human sense.