



My Son the Chef!

Have bragging rights moved from the operating room to high-end kitchens?

By Barbara Ann Rosenberg

It's ironic how quickly common mores can turn topsy-turvy these days. Case in point: It wasn't that long ago that the ne plus ultra way for parents to impress their friends was to let them know that a son or daughter was studying to become a doctor, the most exalted profession anyone could aspire to. A healer. A moneymaker. A mega credit to his/her family.

So, when did things begin to change? When did medic-in-training cease being at the top of the country's most honored profession—or, at the very least, the family position with the greatest bragging rights ever accorded to a mother or father? And whoever heard about anyone erupting with the claim: "My son (or daughter) is training to become a chef," especially from a parent who had achieved a position in life as a doctor—or, even more significantly, as a specialist?

To get to the bottom of this enigma, we began our "research" right here in Philadelphia, with some of our topflight chefs, those guys and gals who worked (or is "slaved" a better word for it?) in other peoples' kitchens before they got a dose of recognition.

Georges Perrier is, in anyone's lexicon, a big-name chef. Did he come from a long line of people who had set the stage for him to make his mark in the kitchen? Not at all. His mother was, and is, a doctor, in general medicine and biology. She is 92 years old and still practicing in France, although, of course, in a considerably more limited way than she did when she was physically

in her prime.

"We are an intellectual family," says Mme. la docteur, "so when Georges told us that he wanted to become a professional chef, that he had a passion for food, it came as a bit of a shock." She recalls, however, that Georges really never liked school all that much, that he was never happier than when he was working at home with her.

Georges admits he learned a lot about the kitchen from his mother. "She was a great cook, and so was my grandmother. So when I made the 'pronouncement' about what I wanted to do with my future, my mother, as usual, pushed me to do it. But my father, a jeweler, objected to the idea. 'That isn't up to our family standard,' he said. 'It's not substantial enough for us even to consider. A son of ours needs to do more than work in somebody's kitchen.'"

"Leave him alone; let him do what he wants," said Maman, "or he'll regret it later."

So, at age 15, Georges got himself admitted as an apprentice at the Michelin-rated Casino Charbonniers, where he spent the next three years. The restaurant was only a few kilometers away, but Georges had never been even that far from home, and he missed family life with his four brothers, and the little bit of cooking he managed to squeeze in when he was there. His mother was unquestionably in charge: the "chef" at home as she was in pretty much everything she turned her mind to. In addition to Dr. Perrier's other talents and accomplish-

ments, she speaks five languages, including fluent English. What an icon to have to live up to!

"Originally, I came from central Russia," says Maman Yvonne Perrier. "And I'm Jewish. So during World War II, I spent three years inside my home, without ever setting foot outside. I didn't want my neighbors to see me for fear they would tell the Germans and I would be imprisoned—or worse. So I just stayed out of sight."

"The people who came to rescue me were Americans. I loved them then. And I still do."

In any event, while he was still in the "early years" of his career, Georges met up with a restaurateur named Peter Von Stark, a guy with plenty of money and lofty ambitions for the Philadelphia food scene. He offered Georges the chance to create a high-end kitchen, with *carte blanche* with respect to ingredients. Philadelphia had never been exposed to such things as foie gras or fresh caviar or any such exotica as the Von Stark/Perrier team sprang on the city food scene. It was as if they threw down the gauntlet: Let the games begin.

And begin they did, with every accoutrement to outfit a world-class restaurant. The little Spruce Street space (home of the original Locust Club) where Le Bec Fin first opened its doors was top drawer all the way. There were even horsehair cushions on the chairs. They weren't too comfortable, but they were rich looking and long wearing, just the way most elegant French folks liked them, according to the decorator hired for the job. Le Bec Fin merited the best of everything: leaded crystal glasses and Limoges china. Hey, this was an expensive restaurant. It cost the patrons the, then, unthinkable \$35.00—fixed price—for dinner, including a rich selection of cheeses and options from a delectable dessert cart, a feast that was akin to what people might have in Michelin star-rated restaurants in Paris.

So, the soon to become legendary chef, the one who would make his mark on the local and then the national and even the international scene, was on his way to stardom, thereby giving his parents bragging rights, if they wanted such

a distinction.

Of course, there came a time when Perrier needed some help in his kitchen. Topnotch help. After several years and changes of people who got their training under all manner of big-name teachers—but were not exactly what the finicky Georges was looking for—he found exactly what he was wanted: a chef who had followed his own star. The young man was Daniel Stern, who, after earning his college degree, worked his way through all kinds of celestial kitchens before he crossed the pond known hereabouts as the Schuylkill from his home in Cherry Hill, N.J. Before he landed in Perrier's kitchen, Stern had already done stints with such legendary restaurateurs as Daniel Bouloud, Jean-George Vongerichten and others of that ilk.

Why did these luminaries accept this little-known, untrained—in the conventional sense—apprentice?

"Because," says Daniel Stern, "they didn't pay me a penny, and I worked my ass off, day and night. And I was damned good at what I was doing!"

But it seems that Stern is still searching for his ultimate spot, since he recently left Perrier's kitchen. He's decided to "take some time off" to figure out what it is he's really looking for "in the long run." He's thinking about looking for a place of his own—a simple place. By so doing, he's following in the footsteps of some of the young stellar chefs in Paris, like Yves Camdeborg, for example, who worked at the Crillon Hotel and then stepped out on his own to open a bistro—a bistro that has become so successful that it takes weeks to get a reservation, even though the restaurant is in an unfashionable section of Paris, a section better known for discount clothing than excellent restaurants.

But the kicker to the Stern story is that his father is—a doctor! A psychologist.

That makes two medicos whose kids have made their mark not in hospitals but in kitchens. Do we sense a trend here? We certainly do. And there are more. Many more.

How about Allen Goldberg, son of

two renowned doctors, Rosalie Burns and Herb Goldberg, she a neurologist and he a neuroradiologist. And what is Allen doing? Pursuing his passion for food in Florida with his own catering business. And where did he pick up this ardor? "Partly from a cook we had working for us for several years," says Dr. Goldberg. "She was really good—an inspiration."

Dr. Burns, formerly chief of neurology at Hahnemann University, never willingly set foot in her home kitchen. "But I love good food," she says in her customary quiet way. "So we eat out a lot, and in the best places. And when Allen was younger, he always went along with us, both in this country and in France, where we went to all the Michelin three-star restaurants."

Dr. Goldberg, on the other hand, does enjoy cooking, a bit. "Simple stuff," he says. When he and his wife eat at home in their state-of-the-art kitchen in one of Philadelphia's fanciest condominium complexes, it's papa who rattles the pots and pans to cook his favorite chicken or fish. Dr. Burns will eat with him, although she infinitely prefers the more complex meals at the nifty restaurants they frequent or when her son "the chef" prepares a meal for her.

Another topflight medico with a daughter who's a chef, is "Pete" Casalia, a maxillofacial surgeon.

When Dr. Casalia and I first came in contact, his daughter Tina was at the Ritz Carlton Hotel working as the banquet chef. She went on to more important posts and then married a guy with sterling kitchen credentials of his own: Terence Feury, one of the celebrated brothers who have settled in Philadelphia to bring ever more exalted credentials to the city.

Now Terence is at Suilan, Susanna Foo's restaurant at the ritzy Borgata Hotel in Atlantic City, and his brother Patrick is at the Ritz Carlton. These chefs do migrate a bit, along with their talented spouses who have made their own marks. And Philadelphia and environs continue to reap the glory. 🍷

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