

Cooking

HOME ALONE, THESE AMATEUR CHEFS' DELIGHT THEIR GUESTS—AND THEMSELVES—JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT

"IT WAS. . . ." FAY ZINGER SEARCHES FOR THE RIGHT WORDS TO DESCRIBE THE MYSTERY, THE ecstasy, the sensuality she wants to convey. Her mouth curls with pleasure, as if she is recalling a great love affair. But Zinger is remembering a tomato, a tomato that James Beard had stuffed with fennel and dried apricots and cooked in the circulating air of a convection oven for several hours, until it was still firm enough to keep its shape on the plate but would melt on the tongue. It was . . . well, words can't express.

Around this city every night, people are phoning for dinner reservations, nuking frozen eggplant parmigiana, stopping off at the Silver Palate or Remi To Go or the Szechuan Cottage/Palace/Garden. Take out and carry in is how many New Yorkers eat these days and how they entertain. But even in a city where time is money, many people are mad enough about food to prepare it with loving, even obsessive, care, and present it beautifully. Most of them insist it's noth-

..... *By*
Aimee Lee Ball
with Gillian Duffy

WINTER SALAD.





FAY ZINGER IN
HER STUDIO.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TED HARDIN

The
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“I MAKE SURE NOT TO HAVE CHEESE IN TWO DISHES,” SAYS MARTIN, “AND IF IT’S A HEAVY DINNER, I’LL HAVE A LIGHTER, ACIDIC DESSERT.”

They are simply providing a show of care for family and friends commensurate with their interests and skills. And the best part is: They get to eat too.

FEED A STARVING ARTIST, reads a sign in Fay Zinger’s TriBeCa studio. The precept is taken quite literally. “I probably seem like the least domestic person in the world,” she says, “but I’m always feeding people.”

Zinger is a partner in Modeworks, a studio that produces decorative murals and floor displays for restaurants, hotels, retail stores, and other public spaces. (Her 60 staff artists are responsible for the clouds above the lap pool at Wall Street’s New York Health & Racquet Club and the pseudo-French revolutionary walls in the Limited’s Express.) Eleven years ago, when the business began, there were almost no neighborhood restaurants for entertaining clients, so Zinger began inviting people for home cooking,

ing special and would hesitate to call the behavior old-fashioned.

prepared with a hot plate and a convection oven (illegally plugged in,

since the commercial loft wasn’t zoned for a kitchen).

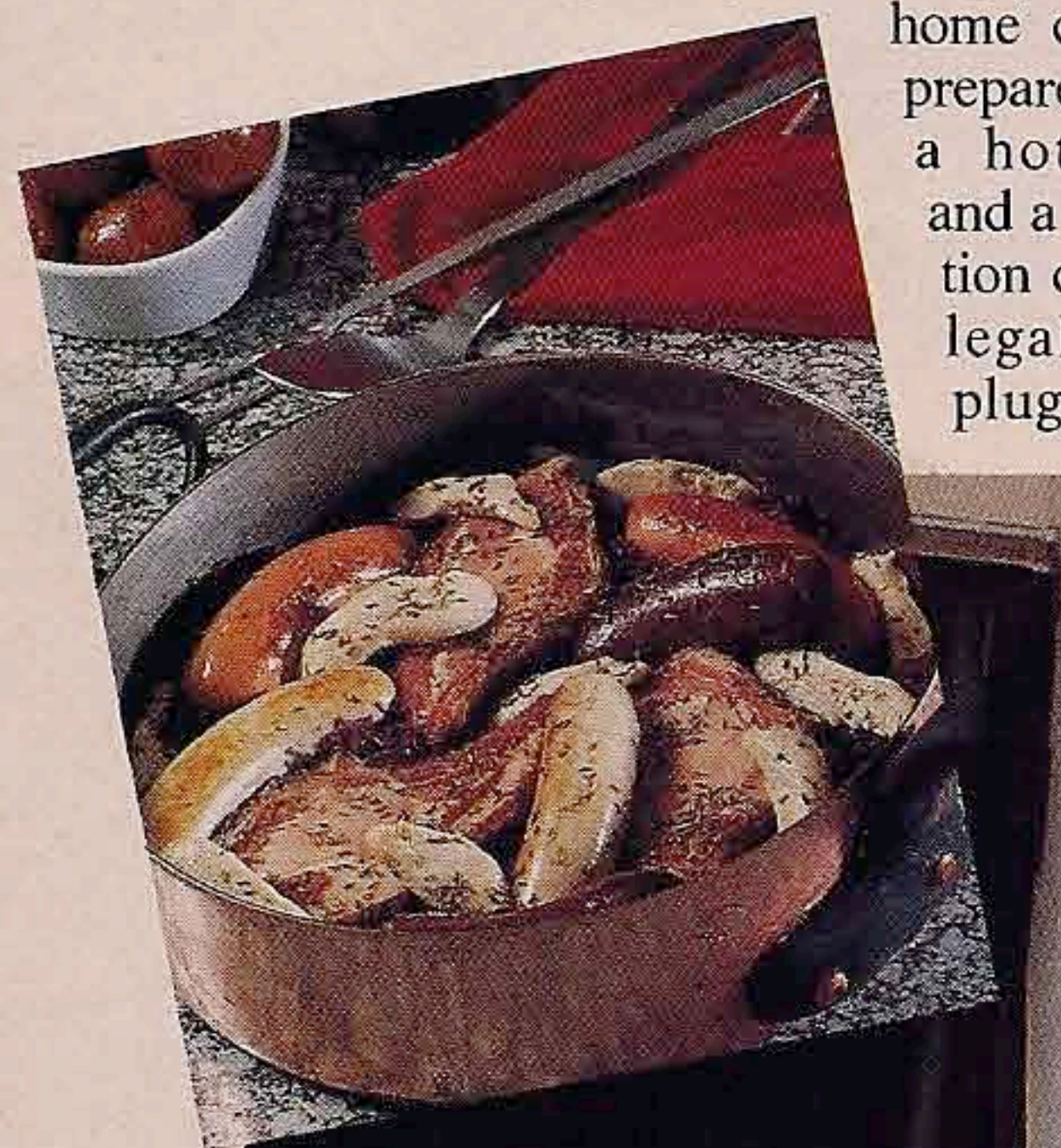
“Here I was in this artistic community,” she says. “Artists kept dropping in, bringing their gallery dealers with them and—gee whiz!—it just happened to be dinnertime. I’d cover a paint wagon with plywood, throw on a tablecloth, and serve a meal.”

Zinger learned how to cook from Audrey Hepburn. Sort of. Watching her favorite movie, *Sabrina*, she used to imitate Hepburn trying to crack eggs with one hand (“It’s all in the wrist”) at a master class in Paris. “As a child, I cooked out of necessity,” says Zinger. “Both my mother and grandmother died when I was young; I had three brothers; and nobody liked the cooks my father hired. But it wasn’t a responsibility—it was an accomplishment.” At college in the south of France (“studying how to be social”), she’d pick up a bunch of sorrel or a piece of salt cod in the marketplace and ask the vendor, “What do you do with this?” Back in New York, she landed a job as an “espresso girl” at Da Silvano, always pestering the owner for his secrets and being told, “None of your business.” She earned his respect when she figured out how to duplicate one of the restaurant’s signature dishes (veal rolled with pistachios and prosciutto, boiled, roasted, and sliced cold).

Zinger rarely makes anything the same

way twice, is not afraid to try a never-attempted dish on company (“I’ll choke ‘em”), and even thinks fondly of such mishaps as her “disaster gnocchi”: The little dumplings are supposed to be filled with ricotta and fresh spinach, poached, and then fried in blackened butter. In a rush, she neglected to wash the spinach. “Basically, people were biting into glass,” she recalls cheerfully. Sand in the spinach aside, Zinger likes food close to its natural state, exemplified by her winter-vegetable salad marinated in citrus juices. “I like a lot of ‘burst,’” she says, “and I don’t like mounds of food on the plate. I prefer a taste of many things, so you’re left thinking, Hmm, what was that?” Some dishes hold more mystery than others, since Zinger has an affection for obscure organs. “Several of my friends tend to poke at their plates and ask, ‘Is this thymus gland?’”

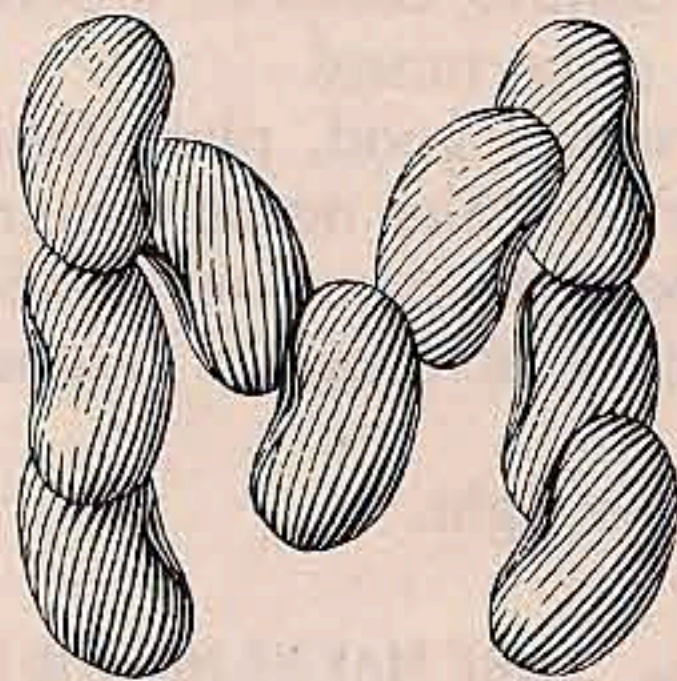
Zinger and her business partner, Norvel Hermanovski, share a weekend house in Fairfield County, where the kitchen is roomy, but she still prefers the small cooking quarters of her TriBeCa office or her West Village studio apartment. “I think I take twice as long in a big kitchen,” she says. “I like to rotate in small spaces.” And she still yells at anybody who tries to keep her company while she cooks. (“Yell?” says Hermanovski, doing a simultaneous translation. “You’ve al-



DEBBY AND JACK GREENBERG WITH HIS “QUICK” CHOUROUTE.

most hit people with a skillet.”)

Her country garden provides the base for many meals—this year she even produced two hardy melons in the compost heap. There’s a standing joke in the house: If there’s any rotten food on the counter—blackened bananas, seriously bruised peaches—don’t throw it away, because Fay will use it. There is no sugar in Zinger’s kitchen or repertoire, so dessert might be a giant popover filled with stewed prunes, apricots, and pears, and she recently perfected a sugarless banana-cream pie for the perennial dieters in her crowd. “But I figure out the number of calories in a piece,” she says, “and I tell people how many times they’re going to run around the block to work it off.”



OST PEOPLE don’t entertain—I’m convinced of it,” says Jack Greenberg, dean of Columbia College and former civil-

rights lawyer. “When they do, it’s a big ordeal or a set piece. What I do is simple, but people make such a fuss.”

Part of Greenberg’s impetus is what he calls the centrifugal forces at work on the Columbia faculty. “We have world-famous professors of chemistry and art history who have been there for twenty years and have never even seen each other,” he says. Greenberg acts as self-appointed matchmaker. Sometimes he gathers these professors for dinner in his large office on campus, preparing a bouillabaisse, gumbo, or chili at home and sending a university truck to pick it up. At least twice a week, he cooks at his big Riverside Drive apartment, with the conversation naturally gravitating toward the splendid sunset over the Hudson River and the equally splendid collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Impressionist posters and prints, dominated by Lautrec’s poster *Aristide Bruant, dans son cabaret*.

Greenberg specializes in what he calls “reverse engineering”: admiring a dish in a restaurant and recreating it at home. He finds it therapeutic to cook at the end of the day (on a red-knobbed Wolf Stove, with an enviable collection of copper pots bought at a Paris auction for \$200 the lot). And he loves to simplify recipes with traditionally labor-intensive instructions (his



FETTUCCINE WITH WILD MUSHROOMS.



NANCY MARTIN ROLLS HER OWN.

quick choucroute is done with store-bought sauerkraut). “A lot of the canon can be done away with,” he insists. “You don’t have to stand in the kitchen stirring the risotto while your company is having cocktails. You can get most of it done ahead, then cover it and finish with five minutes of stirring.”

He appreciates the unusual, such as pig’s feet grilled with bread crumbs and served with a thickened gherkin vinaigrette, although he admits, “I have a hard time getting an audience for that one.” He’s not above lying so that people will taste something like sweetbreads or squid (“It has to be a credible lie”) but tries to accommodate timid or restricted palates. “Usually, it’s not a matter of health or ideology—it’s just yeccccch.”

The provenance of his cooking is varied, with recipes culled from a former South African political prisoner (dirty rice, made

with leftovers), the wife of a Bahamian Supreme Court justice (fish cakes), a Chinese student who lived with his family (cold cabbage salad). “I roam all over the world,” he says. “I had to go to a U.N. meeting in Caracas with the most awful food, but at the racetrack there were these little meatballs with a lot of cumin. . . .” His wife, Debby, a lawyer who runs a human-rights program at Columbia Law School, generally roams with him, but her responsibility for cooking at home is limited to making salads and the occasional pasta primavera and selecting the cheeses. “You know, he’s really a serious person,” she interjects.

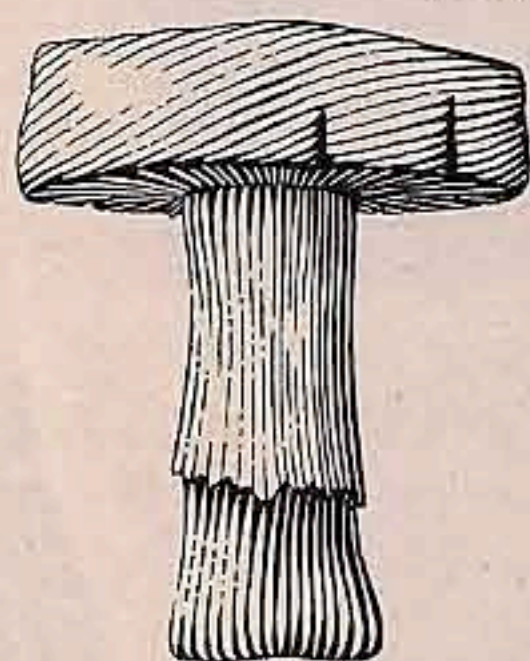
“Do I sound like a twit?” he asks, as if talk of stirring polenta were too frivolous.

Last year, Greenberg put his cooking gospel down in a book called *Dean Cuisine*. (Co-author James Vorenberg was the dean of Harvard Law School, and one of the titles considered, albeit briefly, was “The Duodenal Cookbook.”) Reviewing the book, Julia Child pronounced the male approach to cooking “much freer, faster, more daring, and more casual than the female.” Greenberg appreciates the praise while denouncing the sexism. In his household the opposite is true: “My wife likes to keep things simple,” he says. “I like to do more: fish course,

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“IT’S SILLY TO USE CANNED TOMATOES OR DRIED HERBS IN SHRIMP CREOLE WHEN I HAVE THE UNION SQUARE GREENMARKET,” SAYS JANE STUBBS.

entrée, salad, and dessert. There’s constant tension between us.” But they’re both smiling.



THE FREEZER IN Nancy Martin’s kitchen is filled with homemade chicken and beef stock. Not so unusual. But lobster butter? Pheasant stock?

Cooking is practically a full-time pursuit for Martin, who began entertaining her husband, Larry’s, law clients while living in Florida. Since she came to New York, three years ago, she’s studied with masters like Peter Kump and Giuliano Bugialli. Other corporate wives may support the catering industry, but Martin’s long red Georgette Mosbacher nails are often gummy with yeast dough from her hours spent preparing lavish dinner parties (with after hours spent in aerobics classes, working off the results). She tries to ask guests ahead of time: Is there anything you hate? But she has no interest in dieters. “They can watch their fat and salt at home,” she says. “Here they eat.”

Martin is a purist with few shortcuts in her repertoire. Her Upper West Side brownstone is just around the corner from Zabar’s and Bruno Ravioli, but she bakes her own baguettes and makes pasta from scratch. Fresh pasta, she insists, is not the stuff sold in shops, even the best shops of Little Italy. Fresh pasta is what Martin produces in her own kitchen no more than two hours before company comes.

Listen to Martin rhapsodize about pasta-making: “You have to beat the eggs just like you’re scrambling them. . . . Add a little olive oil to tenderize the dough. . . . Always stir in a clockwise direction to make it more workable. . . . Don’t put the pasta machine on a higher setting until the dough feels like a baby’s butt. . . . And you can listen to the opera while you’re doing it.” Maybe it’s the music that makes the difference.

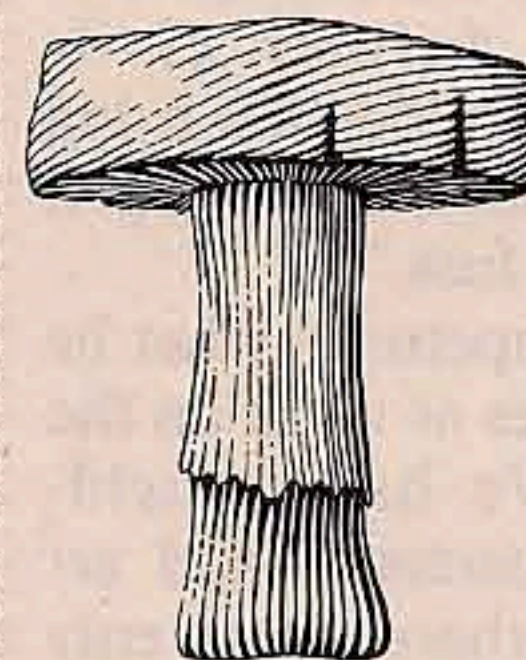
Martin cooks by the book, recipes spread on the counter, relying on bistro fare such as Paula Wolfert’s oxtail daube or Julia Della Croce’s wild-mushroom sauce on egg fettuccine. “But I always put something of myself in the food,” she says. “I cook by feel and vibe. If I have fresh rosemary, I’ll use it.” Her calm before the doorbell rings lies in planning and choreography: the meats for a bollito

misto cut up, the herbs for focaccia chopped, the wine breathing. “I make sure not to have cheese in two dishes,” she says, “and if it’s a heavy dinner, I’ll have a lighter, acidic dessert. The whole evening should be like a piece of art.”

At dinners for six or eight, guests may eat off china from occupied Japan, in front of a rococo fireplace. The pantry is a converted coat closet under a stair landing, with shoe bags holding sacks of arborio rice and pounds of cornmeal.

“My mother was a good, plain Ohio cook,” says Martin. “She never encouraged me in the kitchen. She always said, ‘You’ll have plenty of time for it once you’re married.’”

Mother is always right.



HERE MAY BE NO ONE IN New York more personally disheartened by the recent ugly turn of southern politics than transplanted Southerner Jane Stubbs. Introducing friends to the regional

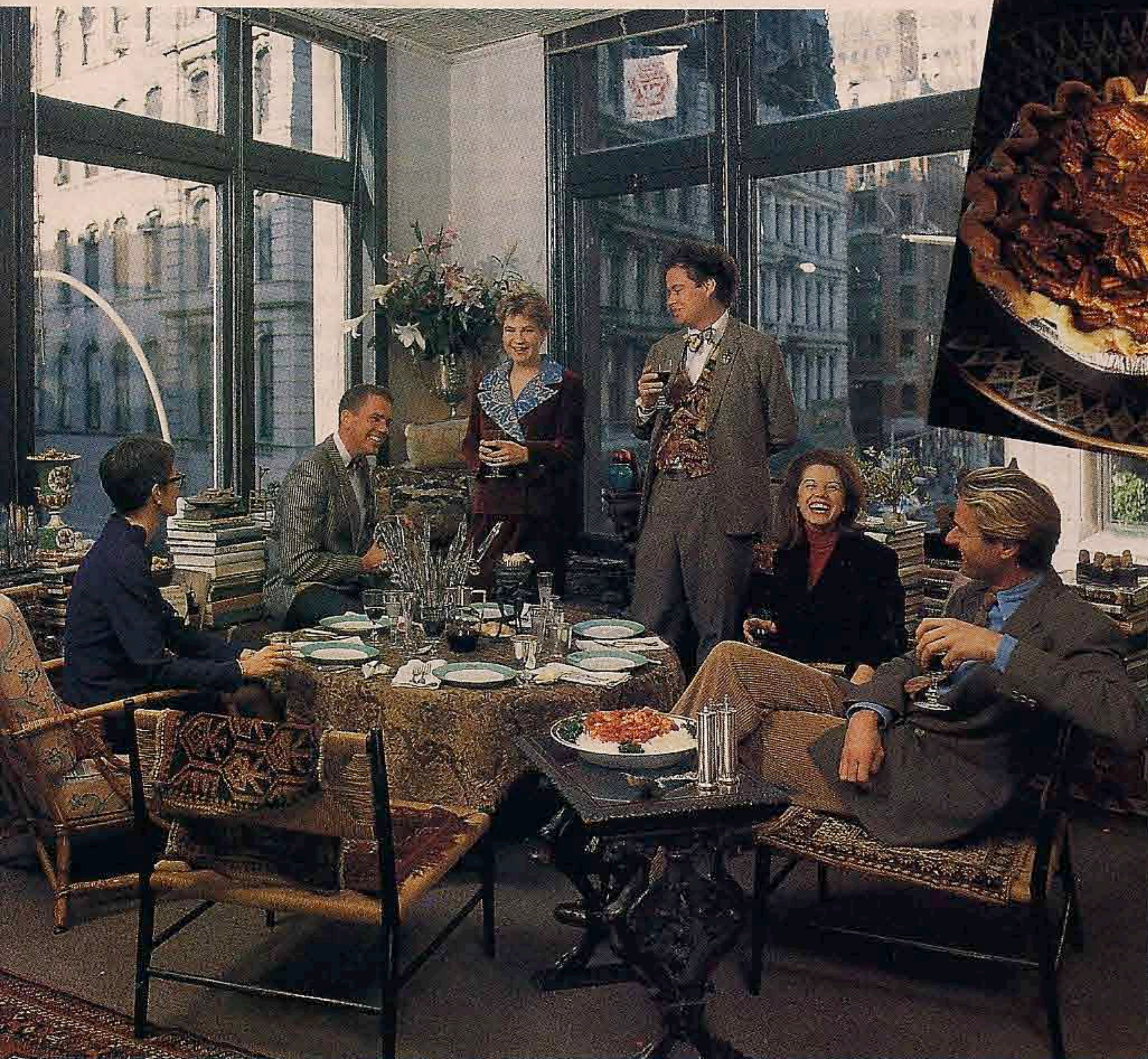
foods of Dixie is her way of proclaiming pride in her heritage.

Stubbs grew up in Natchez, Mississippi, a city just as bucolic as it sounds, sitting on

a high bluff over the Mississippi River and steeped in southern hospitality. The local hotel had the only restaurant in town, so folks entertained at home. “There were so many wonderful cooks,” says Stubbs. “My mother was the exception that proves the rule. We had a cook, but my mother’s standards weren’t very high, so we all tried to scheme and get out of eating at home.”

Her culinary skills were broadened at Tulane University in New Orleans. “To be there for any length of time is to learn about food,” she says. The Stubbs Books & Prints shop, opened ten years ago on the Upper East Side, clearly reflects her interests in food (and wine, gardening, the decorative arts, and social history), but she keeps a formidable private collection of southern and Junior League cookbooks, with names like *Talk About Good!* Now she makes somewhat fresher, lighter versions of beloved recipes. “It’s silly to use canned tomatoes or dried herbs in

JANE STUBBS AND GUESTS: PECAN PIE.



“A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT CHEMISTRY IS CREATED BETWEEN PEOPLE IN YOUR HOME,” SAYS REEVES. “A RESTAURANT IS AN ENTERPRISE.”

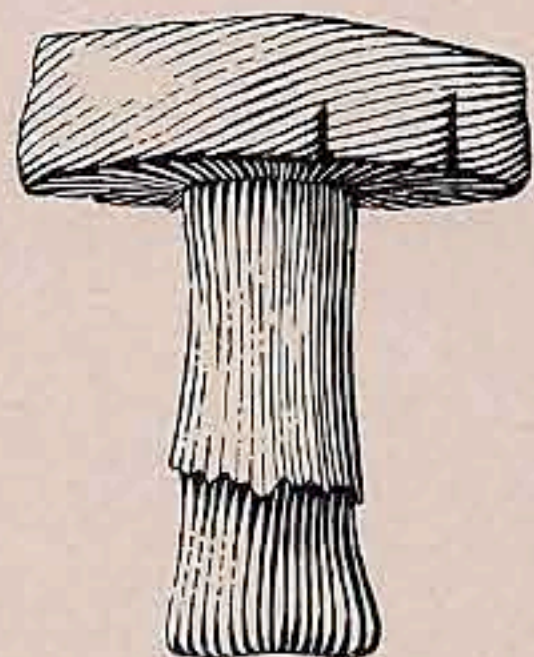
shrimp Creole when I have the Union Square greenmarket

around the corner,” she says.

Her eclectic apartment in the Flatiron district is crowded with collections: porcelain pug dogs, tapestry pillows, no-two-alike antique champagne flutes, and American Fiddlehead silverware that belonged to her grandfather’s grandmother’s grandmother, Hannah B. Keene. The rooms are scented by potpourri Stubbs makes from the flowers she can’t bear to throw out after her gallery exhibits.

Her husband, John, is another Southerner, now program director of the World Monuments Fund, which rescues and restores old edifices, including the figurative stained-glass windows at the Church of St. Ann and the Holy Trinity in Brooklyn. His family owns a pecan orchard in Monroe, Louisiana, so Stubbs has inherited the family recipe for pecan pie, and she often serves drinks with huge pecans that have been buttered, salted, and toasted. “Every few months, the UPS man arrives with a big box and announces, ‘It’s pecan time again,’” she says. When she travels in the South, she brings back supplies of Peychaud’s Bitters (added to club soda for a favorite cocktail).

“I miss the South in many ways,” she says. “I’ve had people for dinner who’ve never had cheese grits and thought it was disgusting,” she says. “My grandmother had cheese grits at just about every meal. This is food that has so many happy memories.”



Wall Street. But at dinnertime, he is likely to be surrounded by friends aged 20 to 70 who have come to count on him for sup-

per. No TV dinners for this divorced man—as he says simply, “I’ve just always cooked.”

Reeves grew up in the Midwest of the fifties and sixties, where, he recalls, “the lamb was always well done and the turkey was so dry you could resole your shoes with the leftovers.” But his grandmother usually had an apricot coffee ring in the oven, and his father was the Ernest Hemingway of Michigan—a big small-game hunter. “Upland birds, downland birds—there were great game dinners,” Reeves says. “The town where my mother still lives is built on a marsh, and sometimes the water

bringing home. Now he cooks for friends on his own motorboat. He sometimes buys the behemoth “tiger shrimp” (imported from Bangladesh) that are sold at the dock, or makes a what he calls a next-generation ratatouille. “You can lay brick with the stuff that’s cooked on the stove for three hours,” he says. “My version uses shoestring-grated fresh vegetables cooked *really* quickly.”

When the boat comes out of the water (as late in the season as possible), Reeves moves his entertaining to the city, picking up fresh produce on his walk home from the 68th Street and Lexington Avenue subway stop. He often grills fish or duck right in his fireplace. “Anything you can cook outside, you can cook inside,” he says, “and the fireplace is fun because it feels a little frontier-ish.” He thinks a dinner party is the best way to make a discreet and casual introduction between two strangers who are meant for one another, and extra leaves in the table let him indulge in his preference for formal sit-downs.

“I like to give people a professionally cooked meal,” he says, “and I don’t like buffets, because the loners go off alone.” A favorite salad course is shredded radicchio sautéed in olive oil and balsamic vinegar, with a molten lid of smoked mozzarella. The only thing store-bought is dessert—“Someone is always kind enough to bring a cake or tart, and this city has fabulous bakeries.”

Reeves articulates a reason for entertaining that is surely shared by all those who cook for company. “A completely different chemistry is created between people in your home,” he says. “New friendships are struck. The level of physical intimacy is different. A restaurant, no matter how good or how well you’re known there, is a commercial enterprise.” An evening in his apartment might even end with dancing. And he has his eye on a 1965 bottle of champagne in his mother’s refrigerator. Let’s hope it fared better than the venison.

level of Lake Sinclair causes the basement to flood, and her freezer floats to another room. It’s the same Maytag freezer she’s had for I don’t know how many years. Recently, I asked her what was in there, and she said there was a venison roast, which has got to be 35 years old.” He is currently trying to instruct his mother in the art of rotating frozen foods.

Reeves spent about a year studying languages in Europe, punctuating 35-cent meals in the cafeteria with four-star meals in Paris, Lausanne, and Grenoble. One summer, he earned passage from Hawaii to California by joining up as the cook on a 125-foot motorboat that a retired naval vice-admiral, paying off a poker bet, was

bringing home. Now he cooks for friends on his own motorboat. He sometimes buys the behemoth “tiger shrimp” (imported from Bangladesh) that are sold at the dock, or makes a what he calls a next-generation ratatouille. “You can lay brick with the stuff that’s cooked on the stove for three hours,” he says. “My version uses shoestring-grated fresh vegetables cooked *really* quickly.”

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TOM REEVES BARBECUES: RADICCHIO WITH SMOKED MOZZARELLA.