

SEPTEMBER 2000

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT and HOTEL FOREFRONT

ART WEDS TECHNOLOGY

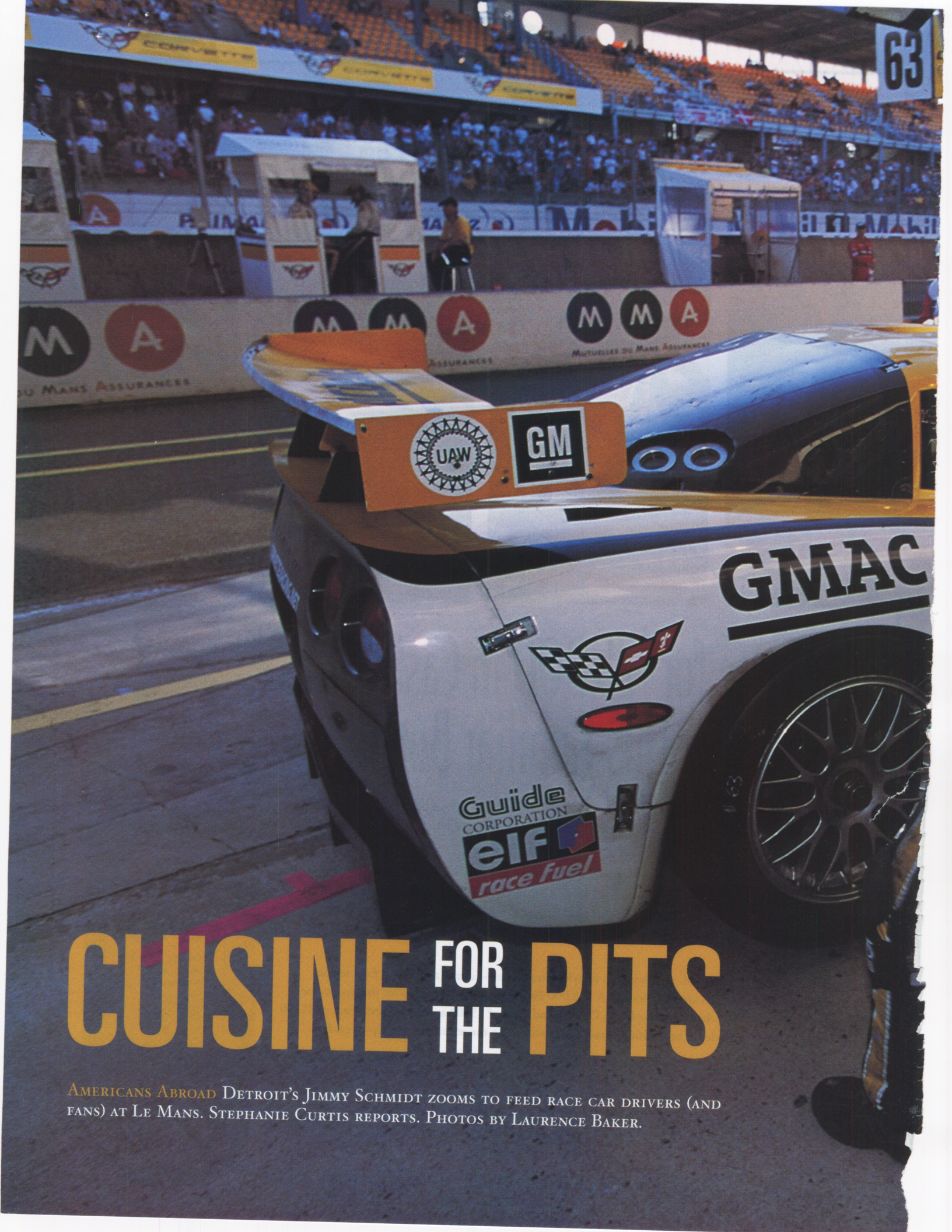
THE CUTTING EDGE

FOOD ARTS

Volume 13, Number 7

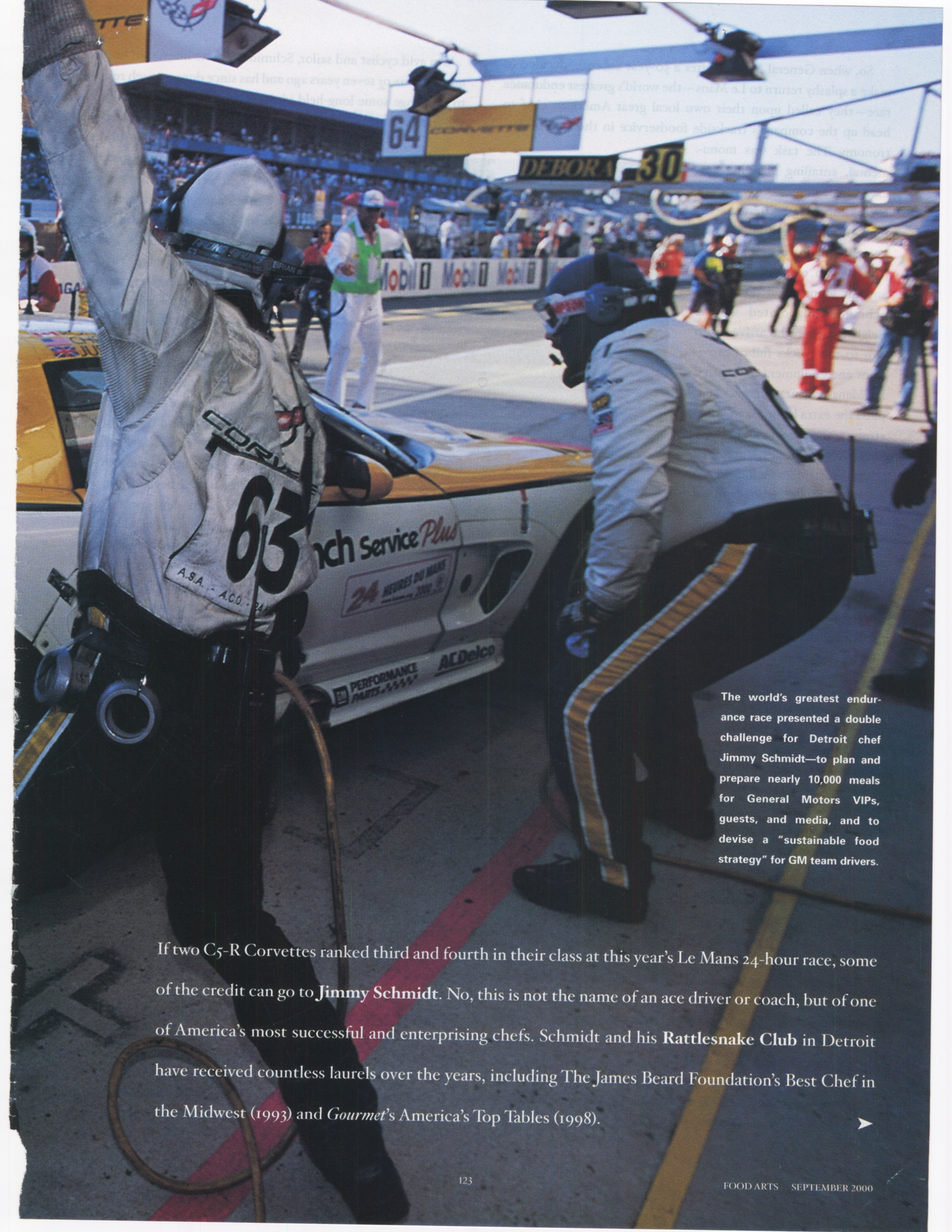
SEPTEMBER





CUISINE FOR THE PITS

AMERICANS ABROAD DETROIT'S JIMMY SCHMIDT ZOOMS TO FEED RACE CAR DRIVERS (AND FANS) AT LE MANS. STEPHANIE CURTIS REPORTS. PHOTOS BY LAURENCE BAKER.



The world's greatest endurance race presented a double challenge for Detroit chef Jimmy Schmidt—to plan and prepare nearly 10,000 meals for General Motors VIPs, guests, and media, and to devise a “sustainable food strategy” for GM team drivers.

If two C5-R Corvettes ranked third and fourth in their class at this year's Le Mans 24-hour race, some of the credit can go to **Jimmy Schmidt**. No, this is not the name of an ace driver or coach, but of one of America's most successful and enterprising chefs. Schmidt and his **Rattlesnake Club** in Detroit have received countless laurels over the years, including The James Beard Foundation's Best Chef in the Midwest (1993) and *Gourmet's* America's Top Tables (1998).

So, when General Motors, after a 50-year absence, decided to make a splashy return to Le Mans—the world’s greatest endurance race—they called upon their own local great American chef to head up the company’s trackside foodservice in the land of gastronomy. The task was monumental, entailing planning and executing some 10,000 meals in a week for several different serving areas, including a VIP lounge, a media center, a trackside pavilion, team dining rooms, and pit lounges. To pull it off, Schmidt collaborated with a Belgian caterer who arrived with two 10-ton trucks full of provisions and equipment and with a Le Mans restaurateur who supplied the extra labor for the 100-strong team of cooks and service staff. Local sources were used when possible, including an organic butcher who supplied the makings for mega quantities of breakfast sausages and all-American meatloaf. “Comfort food!” proclaimed Schmidt.

But Schmidt’s mission consisted of more than coordinating menus for GM’s staff and guests. It was also to create and implement a “sustainable food strategy” for the three GM teams (two Cadillac and one Corvette) entered in the race.

“Until recently, race car drivers cared more about what they put in their cars than what they put in their bodies before a race,” said Schmidt about his sustainable food concept between live satellite interviews for U.S. television. He was talking trackside on a scorching “Mad Friday,” the frenetic day that precedes Le Mans’ most thrilling 24 hours. “Diet has always been important in cycling and other endurance sports but less so for motor racing,” Schmidt explained. “Part of my job here is to create menus that help drivers maximize their performance.” Schmidt’s ideas about nutrition came to the attention of a GM executive last year when the chef collaborated on a school lunch program in Grosse Pointe, Michigan.

An avid cyclist and sailor, Schmidt became interested in sports nutrition six or seven years ago and has since done enough research to challenge some long-held ideas. “Carbo-loading used to be the standard approach,” he explained. “Now, studies show that an all-

carb diet is great at first for quick energy, but that after a certain point, it ceases to sustain peak performance. Now, the trend is toward more of a balance, varying carbohydrates, proteins, and fat. But we’ve discovered that the important thing is to separate carbohydrates and proteins, for easier digestion and more energy.”

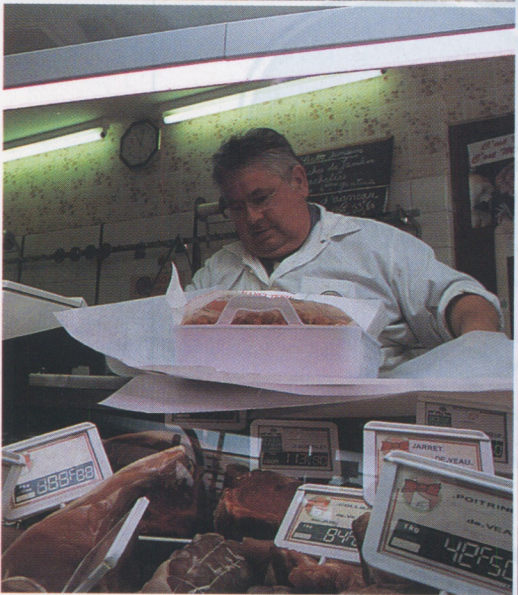
The grueling 24-hour race presented its own specific challenges. Pastas and other carbohydrates were served at the start; then, as the race went into the night, proteins were favored to combat sleepiness. The sustainable concept goes well beyond just separating carbs and proteins. It means using a lot of plant-based and organic foods, banning unnatural or highly processed carbohydrates, and using seasonal produce that has not only more flavor but more nutrients. “A vine-ripened tomato,” explained Schmidt, who scoured Le Mans’ open-air market for fresh produce, regional goat cheeses, and herbs, “has twice as many nutrients as the out-of-season, gas-ripened specimen that graces your supermarket shelves.” Taste and comfort were not overlooked. Ron Fellows, lead driver of one of the Corvette teams, brought along his own week-long supply of Canadian white tuna for Schmidt and his team to dress up with shavings of Parmigiano-Reggiano and virgin olive oil. The strategy was implemented not just for GM drivers, but for the entire pit staff. As one team member put it, “Even if you are in peak condition, but the guy who has to change

your tire at 3 a.m. is half asleep, you’re lost.”

There were plenty of other challenges for Schmidt and his team. The corn tortillas and ancho chiles they brought from the United States, along with hundreds of Schmidt’s signature choco-



An open-air market in the shadow of the Le Mans cathedral and local bakers and butchers were among Schmidt’s sources for mega quantities of basil, freshly baked baguettes, and mini-chipolata sausages.



Clockwise from bottom left: Le Mans butcher Pierre Besnard ground lean organic beef to specifications for Schmidt's signature meat loaf; Belgian caterer Paul Puissant manned the GM trackside barbecue on "Mad Friday"; and GM teams profited from Schmidt's strategy that combined the latest findings on sports nutrition with the chef's own ideas about taste and comfort.

late ravioli and 35 cases of his new line of "smart chocolates" spiked with ginseng and other herbs to stimulate mind and body, were confiscated by French customs agents. And the local fire department nixed the gas hook-up for the trackside barbecue, one of the highlights of "Mad Friday." Nevertheless, the barbecue eventually got fired up to the delight of all those lucky enough to have been invited to the GM pavilion. There were grilled jumbo shrimp with mango salsa, thick steaks with a honey/chile/paprika sauce, dilled salmon and roasted peppers, as well as dozens of side dishes.

"Classically, the food at these events is pretty standard and

banal," explained GM executive Scot Keller. "One of our goals in asking Jimmy to coordinate all this was to make our pavilions really stand out, to do something a little different that would satisfy everyone's tastes." One observer estimated that food costs alone for the GM operation approached \$425,000, but the verdict seemed unanimous. As one guest put it, "GM has the best table in Le Mans."

Stephanie Curtis is an American food and wine journalist living in Paris. She also works for the English language program at École Supérieur de Cuisine Française.