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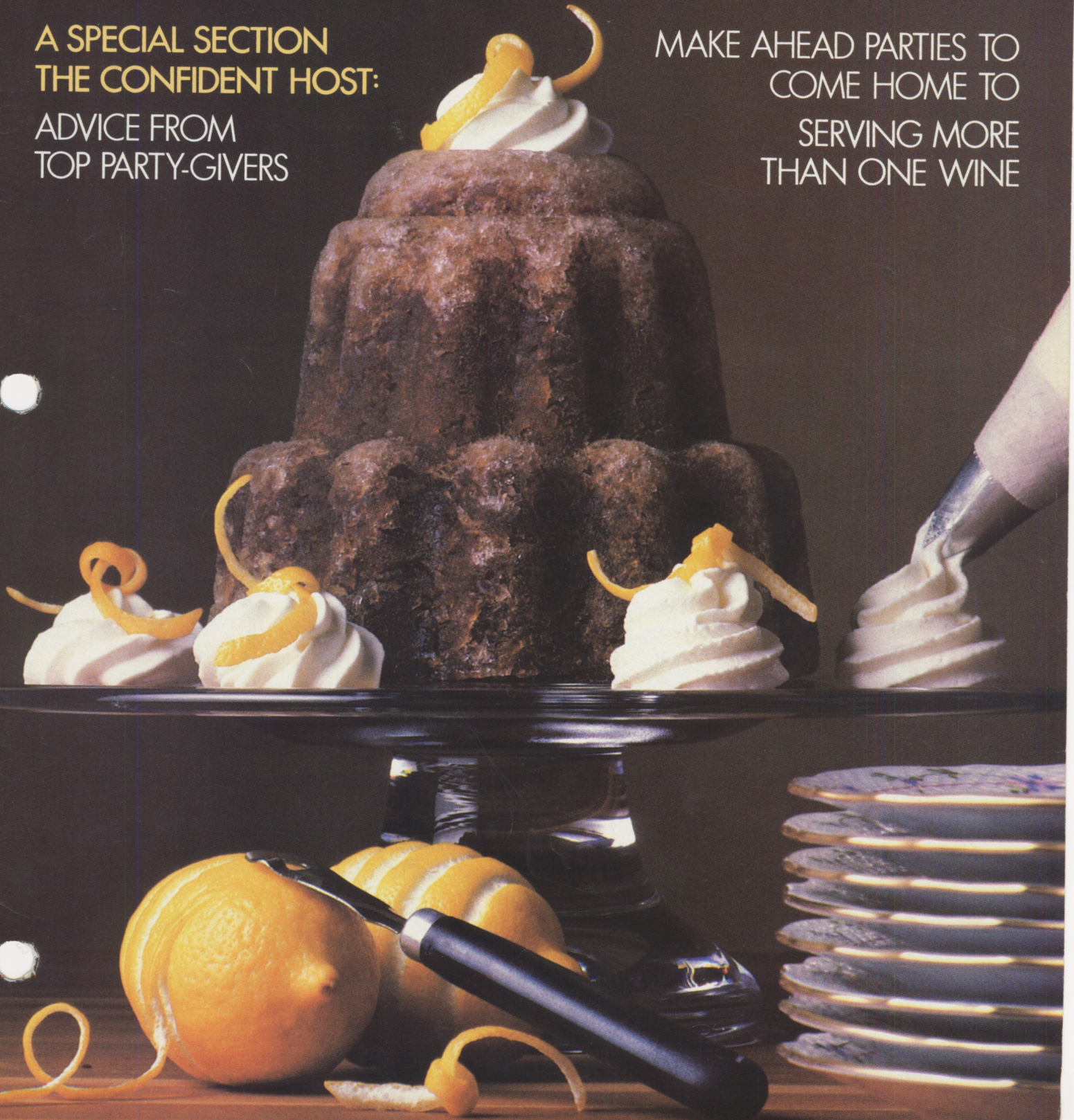
THE GUIDE TO GOOD TASTE

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A Great Restaurant That Breaks All the Rules

DETROIT'S LONDON CHOP HOUSE

BY NAO HAUSER

To create an American saga, you have to start with a crazy dream. Paint it big, bold, seductive and jazzy. Give it sky-high ambitions, an improbable setting, not a few wild gambits and, above all, make it work.

The London Chop House in downtown Detroit is a 46-year-old institution that still flaunts all the elements of a crazy dream. If you've never been before, you might think you had come to the wrong place. Only a small plaque marks the restaurant entrance; once inside, you have to be hungry enough to descend a long, dark staircase to the basement. Once there, you have to be prepared not to flee what appears to be a huge, 1950s suburban "rec room"—complete with big, pastel stuffed animals, walls plastered with celebrity caricatures and signs posted above the bar with such witticisms as "To Hell with Coca-Cola. This is the Pause that Refreshes."

Yet *tout le beau monde* of Detroit gathers here, as it has for more than

At The London Chop House (above), it's the combination of a lively, club-like atmosphere and the inspired cooking of the whiz-kid chef Jimmy Schmidt (left) that keeps the crowds coming back for more.



four decades. At lunchtime, Booth One is likely to be occupied by Mayor Coleman A. Young or the Chrysler chairman Lee Iacocca. As the afternoon slinks into the cocktail hour, the room-length oak bar fills with local TV personalities and journalists who may sip a glass of vintage wine or have a bowl of black bean soup here without being seated for dinner. Gradually, the bar stools vacated by after-work unwinders become pedestals for women in evening gowns. In this timeless, underground place, the hour is announced by the customers' apparel and, as the evening wears on, a live dance band's rhythms.

You can get almost anything you want to eat at the Chop House. That's a big part of what makes it work. This is, after all, Motown. So if you want a

jumbo burger, prime ribs of beef "extra-heavy cut" or "a mess of Lake Erie perch," you'll find your choice listed on the menu. But if you'd rather be somewhere else—at least in reverie—you can begin a meal with a silken portion of sautéed fresh *foie de canard*, proceed to pink breast of duck in tandem with the lightest duck quenelle, and finish with a sunburst of fresh fig and pistachio ice cream on a bed of raspberry purée. You can sniff the bouquet of a '47 Châ-

teau Pétrus or guzzle "Detroit's Pride"—Stroh's Bohemian-style beer. Either way, your feet never have to touch the ground. On the plate, the wild juxtapositions of the Chop House menu yield to a single standard of unimpeachable taste. The Thousand Island dressing is as perfectly balanced as the reduced-stock sauces; the "heap of frog's legs roadhouse style" is prepared with no less delicacy than the oysters in champagne sauce.

So you have to be somewhat sure of who you are, and what you like, to order a meal at the Chop House. The restaurant won't impose an identity on you. In this regard, it is quintessentially American and absolutely the work of Lester Gruber, a Detroit entrepreneur who founded the Chop House as a watering hole for himself

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEAN MOSS

and his friends in 1938, and until he suffered a major stroke in 1981, he missed very few nights at the bar.

Gruber died in 1983, but his presence is still writ large at the Chop House. The scope of the menu, at once European and American, represents his biography. The garish stuffed animals were his whim. The 12,000-bottle wine cellar was his passion. The eclectic assortment of paintings on the walls, some quite fine and others tawdry, are a small souvenir of Gruber's vast gamble on 20th-century artists (the bulk of his million-dollar collection is now in the Detroit Institute of Arts). The hundreds of inscribed celebrity caricatures, drawn tableside by Hy Vogel, recall a gregarious host. Everyone, it seems, from Bert Lahr to Margot Fonteyn, dined here and left words of praise. Gruber's close friend James Beard affirms, "Lester had a tremendous power to make people realize that there was good food in America outside of San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. He was a remarkable person. People loved him. And they came to recognize that he had established something wonderful in Detroit."

Gruber made it clear when he became ill that he wanted the restaurant

to continue. "It's good for Detroit," he said. "It makes a lot of jobs." So Max and Lanie Pincus, civic optimists and friends of both Gruber and Mayor Young, bought it. It was a pact of faith in the city, in the standards of food and wine set by Gruber, and in themselves, for they had no previous restaurant experience. "The city's coming back," they now assert, as if to will the fact with their enthusiasm. "There's been a depression here. But now income is rising again, and people want a place to spend money." The Pincuses, in fact, jumped right into the midst of a joke told about downtown Detroit: "There are two lines here," the saying goes, "one at the unemployment bureau and the other to get into the Chop House."

Like many of the restaurateur's old friends, the Pincuses remember Lester Gruber as an indomitable educator of midwestern palates. For decades, he traveled all over the world, often with James Beard and the great wine expert Alexis Lichine. On Gruber's return, he would supply his steady customers with detailed itineraries of restaurants, markets and museums not to be missed. He stocked the Chop House cellar with 1957 and 1959 Lafite-Rothschild (and began the

policy of offering different wine choices every 10 days to two weeks) when Detroit was considered strict beer and whiskey town. And, in 1977, he decided that Chop House patrons were ready for the new wave of French cooking. The Pincuses recall how he announced the change. "I've got a new kid in the kitchen who does *nouvelle cuisine*," was the inimitable way he put it.

The new kid was Chef Jimmy Schmidt, then 22 years old and a recent graduate of Madeleine Kamman's Modern Gourmet cooking school/restaurant near Boston. Schmidt aimed to transfer the only standards he knew—those of Kamman's 40-seat showcase of exquisite French cooking—to Detroit's 170-seat business-lunch behemoth. Gruber later told him, "I never thought you'd survive."

Schmidt more than survived. He flourished by going into battle on three fronts: with suppliers, with an inexperienced kitchen staff and, not infrequently, with Gruber himself. Today, evidence of Schmidt's victories are apparent in the daily appearance of the produce purveyor, who awaits inspection of each crate of broccoli and radicchio; the twice-a-day deliveries of Great Lakes perch, pickerel and whitefish; and the thrice-weekly air shipments of ocean fish from Boston. The restaurant's lamb is aged at least a month in a special cooler designed by the chef, who majored in electrical engineering at the University of Illinois before he turned to cooking. Lobsters flown in from Maine every other day, along with Belon and Salt Bay oysters, await the pleasure of diners in the 200-gallon tank that Schmidt built.

Even more impressive is the team of youths, whose heads are topped not with toques but with red baseball caps, who have "graduated" from Schmidt's twice-weekly classes in stock making, sauces and breads. Oblivious to the size of the operation, the heat and the waiters' calls for burgers and fries, they concentrate on rolling out puff pastry, curling rosettes of chocolate, and reducing cases of vegetables to the finest hand-cut julienne. Jimmy Schmidt is at everybody's elbow, continually supervising and teaching.

If you can imagine the time it took to find a local farmer willing to supply fresh herbs, to build a meat cooler and to train an unskilled cook to

THE CAUCUS CLUB

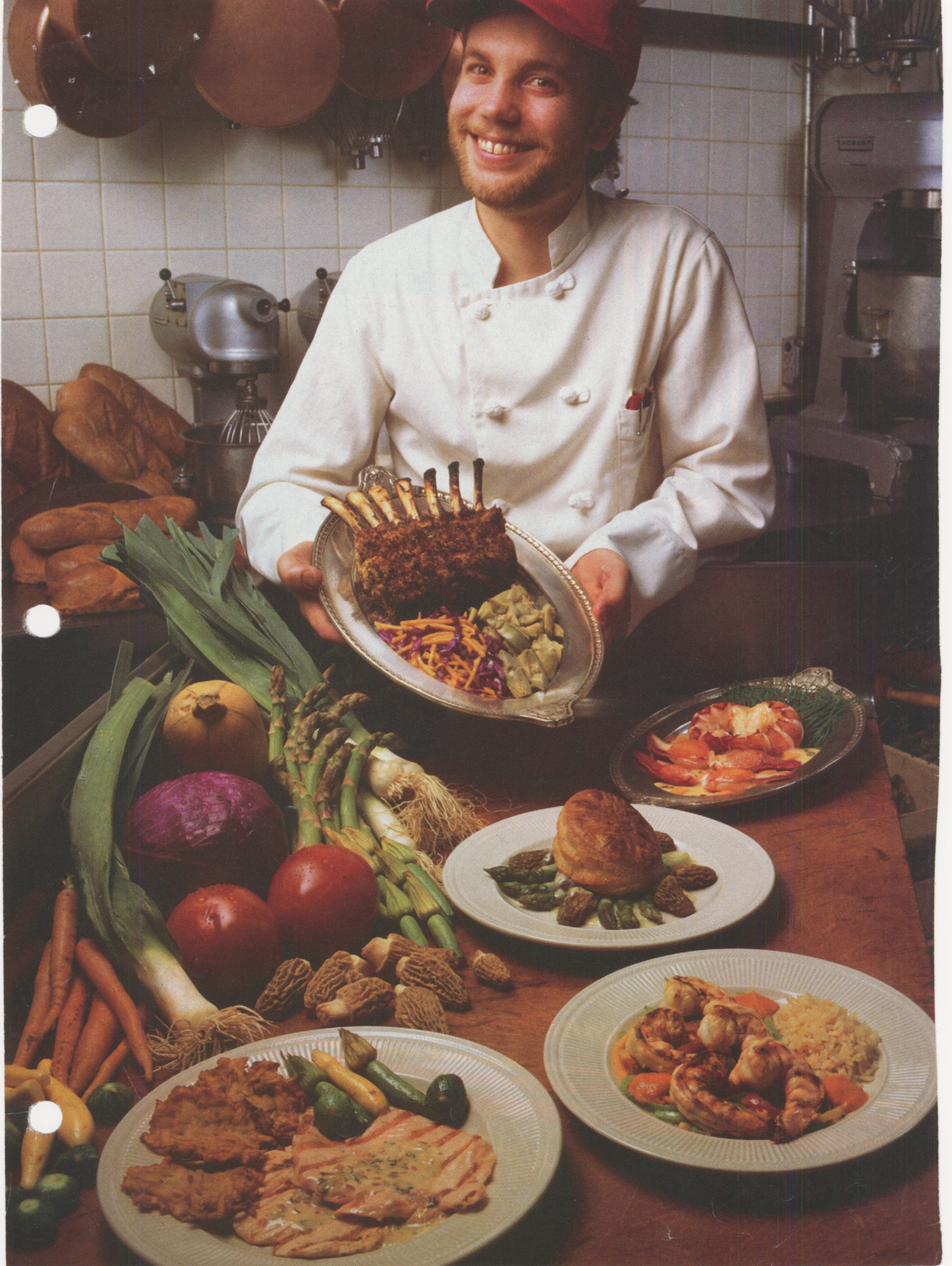
Just Across the Street, a Swell Saloon with Superb Food

Across the street from the London Chop House, you'll find the restaurant's alter ego—a casual saloon called The Caucus Club, opened in 1952. Lester Gruber patterned the place after the English pubs he loved, complete with somber walnut paneling, leaded glass and heraldic shields. But it quickly became another setting for the American saga, Gruber style. Showbiz history was made here in the early 1960s when Gruber booked an unknown 18-year-old named Barbra Streisand to sing in the back room. Her three-week contract was extended to three months, at triple the pay, once Detroit heard her.

The live entertainment policy continues with nightly jazz sessions, but the most attentive audience comes for lunch, when business prospectors vie with the club's spicy chili for claim to the hottest

deal in town. Even if the papers never get signed, nobody leaves a loser, for the food here is superb. Chef Jimmy Schmidt put his imprimatur on the informal menu with meltingly tender spareribs, platter-size portions of moist, grilled fish, a duck salad that haunts taste memory with its combination of duck-skin cracklings, pecans, crisp vegetables and lemon-ginger dressing, a fabulous chunky corned beef hash made from the restaurant's own brined beef and, of course, the chili, which delivers an unforgettable wallop of meat, cumin and peppers.

The wine list is half the size of that at the Chop House and slightly lower priced; about 10 of its offerings can be sampled by the glass. [*The Caucus Club, 150 W. Congress, Detroit, MI; 965-4970. Monday, lunch only. Closed Sunday.*]





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London Chop House continued

make quenelles, then you can understand how *nouvelle cuisine* arrived at the Chop House. Menu innovation evolved with the same deliberation, through a six-year, seven-day-a-week dialogue between Gruber and Schmidt. The experienced restaurateur relished the quest for quality, but he had to be convinced that his young chef wouldn't drive away Detroit business with what he called "effete food." His initial response to Schmidt's refinement of the restaurant's standard roast duck half was typical. "What the hell is that!" he stormed, ready to banish the offering of boneless breast meat neatly curled around the drumstick and wing. But when reminded of his own conviction that food should be easy to eat, Gruber was willing to give it a try. "It is true," he then admitted, "that this way you don't get it all over your suit."

"Gradually, Lester came to understand," Schmidt says, "that I only wanted to make his concepts and standards work for him. Basically, we agreed that food should retain its identity on the plate. In fact, Madeleine Kamman always stressed that point too. You can make a dish intricate, but an oyster should be an oyster and beef should be beef. And whatever else you add should be linked to that essential element. I apply that fundamental tenet from Madeleine in everything I do here—whether it's cooking a plain steak in beef suet rather than vegetable oil to maintain the flavor link or poaching an oyster in oyster juice and then using the reduced liquid as the basis of a champagne and cream sauce."

What results from the linking of ingredients is an intensification of flavor that can only succeed if all the elements of taste are balanced with extreme care. And it is this flawless balance that marks the Chop House menu, from clam chowder to chocolate soufflé, as unmistakably the work of Jimmy Schmidt.

The chef has refined all Chop House offerings, but his own tastes and ambitions are most fully realized under the menu heading of "Entrées-Specialties," the small section most likely to change in the list's daily update. Schmidt's response to the day's freshest ingredients can be as direct as a grilled Florida swordfish steak honored in its sweetness and robust texture by a dipping sauce of caramelized shallots and Beaujolais wine. Or

it can be as intriguing as a blend of concentrated duck stock, vinegar, the nuts and *quatre épices* served beside sautéed duck breast and sliced pear. The opulence of a beautiful rack of lamb may be complimented by the hearty bouquet of basil that flavors a sauce made from lamb stock and cream. The delicate taste of bay scallops will emerge through an emulsion of champagne and lobster butter so sheer and subtle that it seems to defy sauce-making technique.

If you want unqualified solace from Schmidt's art, you need only dive into the desserts. They are all go-for-broke rich. "I developed many of these recipes according to what Lester wanted," Schmidt says; and indeed they come across as the most tangible souvenir of a playfulness the two men shared—an exuberance in their attitude to food that bridged the almost 50-year gap in their ages. To satisfy Gruber's appetite for "a bread pudding better than any found in New Orleans," Schmidt created the lushest amalgam of custard, red wine pear compote, spices, bourbon caramel and wheat bread. To melt all hearts, he worked four times the usual amount of chocolate into a cross between a frozen mousse and an ice cream dubbed "Quadruple Chocolate Suicide." To pacify more complex dreams, he shaped a frozen soufflé that leads tastes through an odyssey of mint, Chartreuse liqueur and dark chocolate. To affirm the value of showmanship, he channeled fresh raspberry flavor into pouffed-to-order hot soufflés.

Schmidt knows that what goes on now would please Lester Gruber very much. You can tell by the vitality of the dining room. A guy can still bring his best girl here knowing that what they'll dine on is not just Saturday-night special, but special like the two of them. The mayor can flatter government officials and businessmen here with a meal as grand as his plans. You can talk steel prices here or honeymoons; you can talk intimately or loud. The Chop House is still the place in this country where all comers are treated alike to the finest food to be found. [The London Chop House, 155 West Congress, Detroit, MI; (313) 962-1087. Closed Sundays and holidays.] □

Nao Hauser writes frequently about food and restaurants and is the co-author of, most recently, The Popcorn Lover's Book (Contemporary Books).



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