

James Beard

Dining

The London Chop House— A Detroit Tradition

In my opinion one of the finest restaurants in this country is not in New York or San Francisco, as you might expect, but in Detroit. I have known the famed London Chop House over a long period of time and watched the owner and director, Lester Gruber, build his restaurant with unstinting devotion and tremendous effort. Lester is a perfectionist of the first water, and for the 25 years or so that I have known him he has striven to make the Chop House better and better all the time. Wherever he goes, he is always ready to investigate a new restaurant, try a new dish, or taste a wine he has heard about. His gastronomic experiences have paid back a hundredfold.

Lester always wanted to be in the restaurant business. When he started out, the country was in the depths of the Depression, but he took a chance and opened what is known as a gypsy tearoom. During the Depression, gypsy tearooms flourished throughout the United States because they provided a place where, for a minimal charge, people could have a sandwich or a piece of cake with a cup of tea and have their tea leaves read, which gave them a psychological lift and very often sent them out feeling more cheerful. It was tea with, if not sympathy, encouragement and a modicum of entertainment.

Eventually Lester had 50 gypsy tearooms, and these gave him the foundation on which to build his dream, the London Chop House. It was for many years the one restaurant in Detroit where one dined well, and, to my mind, it still remains the best restaurant in that city.

The Chop House is not a glittering showplace, like some of our latter-day restaurants. As a matter of fact, it is below street level in a business building in downtown Detroit. But it has an immeasurable quality, a personality that makes you relax and immediately feel at home. There is a great bar, which must be one of the longest anywhere

in the country and comfortable banquettes and tables. There is a room for late evening dancing to an orchestra.

Around the walls are paintings dealing with food and wine, collected by Lester and his brilliant and beautiful wife, Cleo, on their travels. Cleo has never been part of the running of the restaurant, but she has a great sense of the arts and was instrumental in choosing some of the paintings. She is an excellent cook, and almost as good a judge of food and wine as her husband, and she has constantly encouraged and aided him in the furtherance of his ideas and ideals.

There are caricatures of celebrities all over the walls and ceiling. If the truth be known, I think Lester's aim when he started was to make the Chop House a gathering place for the famous, the successful, and the newsworthy, and it has certainly been to Detroit and the Middle West what "21" has been to New York, "the heaven of the famous." (I would call it the heaven of the palate, too, for any lover of fine food and wine.) For the most part, everyone in the restaurant seems to know everyone else. It has attracted people from the automobile industry, from the liquor companies across the river in Canada, plus actors, musicians, and writers. It seems that anyone who comes to Detroit gets to the Chop House sooner or later.

During the many years I've known Cleo and Lester, we've taken a number of trips together, sampling food and tasting wine all over the world. Lester has an exceptional palate, and he has been wise enough to ask the advice of Alexis Lichine, the late Frank Schoonmaker, and all the luminaries of the wine world. As a result the Chop House wine list is one of the two greatest in this country, with some extraordinary bottles and prices ranging widely from around \$6 or \$7 for a California red varietal such as a Sutter Zinfandel up to \$125 for a 1961 Chateau Pêtrus. One of the things I like

most is the fact that the wines are listed on the reverse side of the luncheon and dinner menus so you can select your meal and your bottle at the same time. Most of the wines listed are available by bottle or case for off-premises use, at a substantial discount.

The bar is staffed by barmen who make tending bar an art, not just a service. There's a heartiness and friendliness that makes you feel like lingering. Fine crystal and glassware are used to serve a staggering collection of whiskeys, gins, vodkas, vermouths, and aperitifs. And if you've been offered a drink and don't want to accept at that moment, you can take advantage of one of Lester's delightful little touches — a rain-check file where the drink offer is entered on a card so you may claim it next time you are there.

Some years ago Lester supplemented the Chop House with a place across the street called the Caucus Club, which serves lunch, dinner, and supper, but has a different, simpler, heartier menu than the Chop House, not at all competitive. Here you will always find well-made and substantial sandwiches like the Reuben, and originals such as the Bull & Bear (corned beef, chopped liver, lettuce, tomato, cole slaw, lamaze dressing), superb hamburgers and chili, excellent salads, corned-beef hash with poached egg, London broil, double-thick lamb chops, and whole broiled Dover sole. It's a place for gutsy food, the kind many of us feel like having for lunch or a snack supper or even, on occasion, for dinner. On the evening menu, I'm honored by "Jim Beard's Hamburger Steak," which is coated with coarse black pepper and flamed with brandy. The wine list, incidentally, is as good as that of the Chop House, if not quite as extensive.

There are always things on the Chop House menu that are different and intriguingly named. For years one of my favorite luncheon dishes was floured and fried

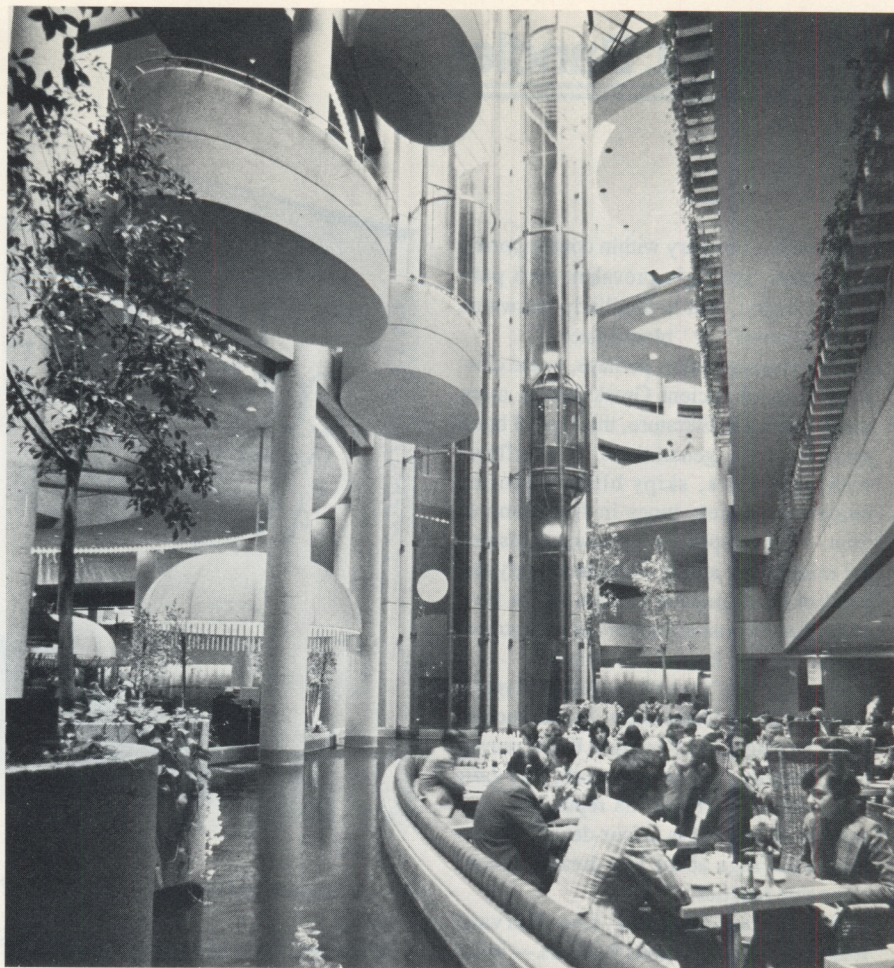
perch, known as "a mess of lake perch," an amusing and highly descriptive term. Another was the frog's legs roadhouse style, the tiniest frog's legs, also deep-fried, so immature and tender you could eat them bones and all.

Naturally, the menus change with the times and with the chef. The chef is now Jimmy Schmidt, a young man who studied with Madeleine Kamman at her Boston cooking school, Modern Gourmet, and was for two years senior chef at her restaurant before coming to the Chop House. The present menus, while still featuring the old favorites like broiled meats, calf's liver with bacon, and house-cured corned beef and cabbage, have starred items that reflect the influence of *la nouvelle cuisine*, described as "current concepts of lean, nutritious dishes; clarity and purity of flavors; natural taste vitality; light, gentle sauces and low-fat, high-pleasure gourmet cooking." Among the items are shrimps St. Tropez, strip steak Madagascar with green peppercorn sauce, snails Burgundian in mushroom caps, snow peas with ginger-butter sauce, and *rassolnik*, a cream of dill cucumber soup, served hot or cold.

For an anticipatory taste of Chef Schmidt's cooking, here is his recipe for Leg of Chicken Jerez:

Heat 4 tablespoons unsalted butter in a heavy skillet or sauté pan that has a tight-fitting lid. Let it heat for 1 minute. Then add 4 chicken legs, and brown them lightly on all sides. Add 1 cup whipping or heavy cream, and reduce heat to a simmer. Cover pan with lid. Allow the liquid to reduce, then add 1 cup chicken stock, 1 chicken bouillon cube, and another cup of heavy cream. (Do not add all the liquid at once, replenish as it cooks away.) Cover and simmer until the legs have cooked for 15 minutes. Then turn them, and add ¾ cup currants that have soaked for 1 hour in ½ cup amontillado sherry (drain currants and reserve liquid). Cover and cook 15 minutes longer, then add ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg, ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon, and ¼ cup toasted slivered almonds. Remove lid, and let liquid reduce to a sauce consistency (if the legs are cooked as they should be, remove them, and reheat briefly in the sauce before serving). Add the sherry in which the currants soaked, salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste, and a little lemon juice if the sauce seems too sweet. Serves 4.

James Beard, our contributing editor on dining, has long been recognized as the dean of American cooking.



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