

HAMBURGERS, HEMORRHAGES, AND HAUTE CUISINE

by Lynne Friedman

U SC HOSPITAL, CENTRAL LOS Angeles.
“Where are you, Hal?”
“I’m with a pretty nurse.”
That’s how I knew my dad was “with it” in the wee hours of January 14, 2016, after he suffered a brain hemorrhage that put him into emergency surgery.

The surgery had gone well, but sedating an eighty-four-year-old has its risks and it took him a long time to come out of it. He was agitated and fighting to get up, so they had to sedate him again, just for the follow-up CT scan. This last dose of sedative took away his ability to speak or respond for close to twenty-four hours. And that was scary for me, his only child.

When he opened his eyes, the staff tried to evaluate him. They asked him questions about where he was and what year it was. Blank stare. But I knew how we would get a response:

“Do you like Tommy’s chiliburgers or hot dogs better?”

“Hot dogs.”

“Dad, what’s your favorite pie? Apple or rhubarb?”

“Rhubarb,” he said.

Then, he looked straight at me. “Will you make me a rhubarb pie?”

And the answer was yes, absolutely yes. I am a chef who cooks upscale international cuisine, but getting that rhubarb pie exactly right for the man who has been my most forthright critic meant more to me than any praise I might get elsewhere. And I hoped I would get to go to Tommy’s with him again. I could have a chiliburger while he eats his hot dog, passionately insisting that it is even better than the chiliburger I was eating. I’ll take that—and a root beer, too.

THE LARGE TOMMY’S SIGN—SQUARE-SHAPED and red, with a bright border of flashing yellow lights—turned ’round and ’round, like a lighthouse beacon, calling people to the corner of Rampart and Beverly Boulevards. The surrounding neighborhood was not particularly walkable at night, but people stood in line under the bright lights at the pearly gates of this fast food heaven, twenty-four-seven.

It was the chili. Not the kind that was served in a bowl, but a proprietary chili specifically formulated with the right mixture of flour and water so it would stick to a burger properly. Outside the shack the restaurant’s namesake bought in 1946, students, local artists, gangsters, actors, and tourists stood next to each other, united in a common mission known far and wide to Angelenos everywhere as a Tommy’s Run.

By the 1970s, it was not uncommon to see limos parked any hour of the night with a celebrity or two waiting at one of the two Tommy’s serving stations that now took up the entire corner. Everybody wanted his or her fix. And that night in early 1972 my dad drove me, his small girl-child, thirty minutes from our home in the suburban West San Fernando Valley to break me into this tradition. Sure, there had been a few other Tommy’s locations popping up around town, but this was the original, the only one worthy of “Tommy’s Run” distinction. Our black 1965 Buick LeSabre took its place in the parking lot full of cars—big cars, dreamboats, with and without good paint jobs. As we stood at the thin wooden counters (no seats, per true burger shack tradition) and ate our burgers slathered with the unique mortar-like

chili, my dad told me how he and his friends used to come here as teens from their homes in South Central, where he had moved in early 1947, back when this simple shack had been the new burger joint in town. I doubt he imagined that, long after he drove out of the lot, long after I fell asleep sans seatbelt while inhaling the leather-scented fumes of the Buick's back seat, I would, as a college student, often drive to make this very same run with my friends.

TEN DAYS AFTER MY dad's initial surgery, I drove him home from the hospital. Though disoriented and off-balance, he was in good spirits and so was I. I had spent the better part of the last ten days at my dad's bedside convincing him, sometimes physically and almost unsuccessfully, that he couldn't simply get his keys and drive out of the hospital lot. Home would be good.

My parents had always kept their house in decent order, but there was still that room—the room that accumulates stuff. In the not-too-distant future, that room would very likely be housing a caregiver. Opening the door, I looked down and spied a small bit of the green shag carpet that, unlike the rest of the house carpeting, had never been changed. Years of paper, books, newspapers, and other assorted ephemera greeted my eyes, every one of which would require me to determine whether was it part of my parents' soul, and thus in need of preservation, or, say, an expired oil change coupon clipped in 1989. It was almost too much for me to take in, and I considered putting it off for another day...that is, until I noticed all the newspaper articles and books on restaurants. And menus.

A lot of menus.

I sat down and started flipping through them, each one prompting memories—personal, regional, even historical—of a life spent reading between the culinary lines.

“WHEN I GROW UP, I want to be a waitress.”

My ambitious declaration was inspired by our server at the Hamburger Hamlet that night in 1973. Her beehive hairdo, black skirt, and white, frilly apron and cap appeared nothing short of spectacular to my six-year-old self. *She's so friendly and smiley*, I thought, *that she must be the one of the happiest people on earth.*

At Hamburger Hamlet, the burger had taken a walk on the fancy side. Marilyn and Harry Lewis, a married couple who worked as a costume designer and actor, respectively, had founded Hamburger Hamlet back in 1950 as a hangout for their entertainer compatriots. “The Hamlet” had given the burger a new dress: it could be presented on an oak plank, or swathed in mushrooms, avocado, bacon, or bleu cheese. It could attend a Hollywood party escorted by glamorous side, such as lobster bisque, onion soup fondue, shrimp cocktail, and “those potatoes”—fried crispy and layered alternately with sour cream and scallions.

“Would you all like dessert?” asked the spectacular waitress as she peered out from behind her cat-eye reading glasses. The sound of her words was sweet and smooth, like the milkshake I was about to order. Her name tag said “Lovenia” and she was African-American, like most of the other waitstaff. Unlike many restaurateurs in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, the Lewises had made a point of hiring African-Americans, so much so that they were eventually slapped with a reverse-discrimination lawsuit. When they expanded to Orange County in the 1970s, the African-American staff there was escorted to and from their cars by the Costa Mesa police, as the neighborhood white supremacists had threatened death to a chain that dare employ diversity in their homogenous neighborhood.

The milkshake, topped with a mountain of whipped cream, arrived in a shapely, tall glass. (I try to recall, was that glass tinted amber like so many glasses in the seventies? Did the amber color make glasses more groovy? Perhaps...) I enjoyed every drop of it in our high-backed red leather-ish booth in the midst of this dark wood-paneled restaurant.

The Hamburger Hamlet had several locations then and they moved with the times. At one point in the seventies the Hamlet even

embraced the disco craze and was asylum to dancing polyester-clad, gold chain-sporting patrons, many of whom spent more time in the bathroom booths Hoovering up cocaine than they did in the Hamlet's booths, Hoovering up red meat 'n' taters. Trends, however, would change, and as LA's burgers moved into fast-casual territory, the Hamlet fell out of vogue, its equivocation over its dressed-up or stripped-down identity very much echoing the ambivalence of its Shakespearian namesake, whose most-famous quotes adorned its menu pages.

“WORDS, WORDS, WORDS.”—SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

Now, post-brain surgery, my dad would often struggle with words as I tried to pry out names of restaurants and stories from his life. Finding the right word to describe what was in his memory about the things we did together was difficult for him. His face showed the emotion of what he was thinking about, but sometimes the exact words refused to bubble up to the surface.

My dad also struggled with writing. In fact, his inability to handwrite easily had been the stroke tip off that sent us to the hospital in the first place. As a young man, my dad had been a professional graphic artist, and, although he switched in 1963 to the bright, shiny new field of computer programming, his artistic vision still peeked through in the birthday cards that he used to make for my mother and me.

A couple days after he came home, it was again my birthday. And, for the first time, my dad was unable to make me a card. Maybe there were a few cards from years past in “that room.” But I didn't find a card, I found a menu from Chasen's, where we had celebrated my birthday years before. This year, we would celebrate it at my childhood dining room table. My father was home, and that was my greatest gift.

ONETTA JOHNSON, THE CHASEN'S restaurant ladies' room attendant, was tired. After a mad rush (business ebbs and flows in a ladies' room),

they finally left her alone for a moment—just enough for her to realize that she was entirely exhausted. She worked two jobs and she was operating on very little sleep.

“I wish all these people would just go home,” she said aloud to herself as she dropped her head into her hands. Or, was she only speaking to herself? Donna Summer had walked in the door from the hubbub of Julio Iglesias’ Grammy party, just in time to overhear her complaining.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Summer.”

“Oh, that’s alright,” Summer said. “You work hard for the money.”

A portal to the heavens opened in the ladies’ room that night and the light of creativity shone down on Summer. Pulling a pen from her purse, she wrote the lyrics to what became an early eighties mega-hit on toilet paper in this institution of a restaurant.

Ladies’ room attendants weren’t always *de rigueur* in Los Angeles eating establishments, but this was Chasen’s. Dave Chasen opened a chili joint in 1936 to serve Hollywood actors and it morphed into a full-scale, upscale restaurant where Washington power dined with Hollywood power—literally. In the seventies, conservative President Nixon could be seen dining with Paul Keyes, famed producer of the psychedelic comedy television show *Laugh-In*. The Reagans were engaged there decades back, during their Hollywood days, and they continued to dine there often, even well into their Washington power years. Frank Sinatra, Orson Welles, Lucile Ball, and a number of other notables had booths there. Your position in life could be determined by your seat’s power status at Chasen’s.

It’s important to remember that, for most of the 1970s, going out for fancy food in Los Angeles meant continental cuisine—rich, brown, sweet, and flaming continental cuisine. At Chasen’s, tuxedo-uniformed career waiters carted chafing dishes to your table and seared steaks in butter—a lot of butter—just to your liking. The waiter already knew how you wanted it cooked because he knew you. And if he didn’t know you, he could make a pretty good guess at how you liked your food based on how you looked or where you were from. The waitstaff studied that stuff as they worked, and many of them had worked there for decades. Bartender Pepe Ruiz joked with celebrities

as he lit orange peels on fire with trademark flair, infusing the sherry inside his specialty Flame of Love cocktail. Everything was on fire here; Steak Diane, Crêpe Suzette, and the careers of the Hollywood glitterati who were there to eat, drink, and be seen. But people still came for the chili. Nixon had had the chili delivered to San Clemente so he could enjoy some with Henry Kissenger. A decade before, Liz Taylor famously flew the chili out to Rome during the filming of *Cleopatra*, and she continued to enjoy it on a regular basis with two-time husband Richard Burton. It wasn't on the menu, but it was very much in the hearts and minds of the cognoscenti of Los Angeles high society.

For my birthday, we were invariably seated somewhere between Siberia and the ladies' room, but no matter; they plied me with their infamous banana shortcake. The menu, found under mounds of paper in "that room," memorialized this rich experience, but there was one place where my parents regularly dined for which they had no menu.

"NOT FOR FIVE MILLION dollars."

This was the answer Sam Kovich gave a prospective patron when he telephoned and asked, "Would it be alright if my wife wears a fancy pantsuit to your restaurant instead of a dress?"

Kovich, proprietor of The Coolibah, was annoyed, and he meant what he said. You couldn't hand him \$5 million to put up with a female patron who didn't wear a dress or a male patron who didn't don a jacket and tie.

The curious customer-to-be was a lawyer, and a good one, so he had to ask another question. "What is on the menu that evening?"

"There is no menu!" Kovich said. "We are not a restaurant, we are a dining room! And, since you asked, it will be hamburgers!"

Click.

But it wasn't going to be hamburgers. It was to be chateaubriand, along with seven other elaborate courses including smoked pheasant soup, shrimp canapés, and lamb noisettes. Until 1977, The Coolibah sat tucked away in a corner shopping mall in the far reaches of the

San Fernando Valley. Despite its location somewhere north of off-the-grid, people came, and Sam Kovich had his rules. It didn't matter who the hell you were: no tie, no dinner.

Kovich also didn't care how far you drove to get there. If you showed up five minutes late, banging on the closed door, he would not let you in. If you were early, and you chose to have a beer at the bar next door, that beer would be the death knell for your dinner plans. Urban legend had it that the brother of President Johnson was denied entry for that very reason. But if you played by the rules, Kovich welcomed you. Appearing at the door, he handed you a glass of sparkling wine and gave you a tour of the kitchen.

"Never trust a place that won't show you its kitchen," he said.

It was spotless. How the hell were they going to spew forth eight magnificent courses from a kitchen that, other than one pot of soup on the stove, did not have a speck of food on its counters? But they did, and the food was world class. Flowers, almonds, Hollywood-esque candelabras, and goblets sat atop the crisp white tablecloths of The Coolibah's diminutive dining room. A red rose for each female guest lay on place settings awash with multitudes of silver forks and knives that marked each course. Sitting next to your date, however, was considered bad manners at a table, and Sam Kovich would not hesitate to come out and say something to that very effect should you make that mistake during dinner. Kiss your date, and you likely wouldn't make it to the next course.

Was all this fussiness worth it? Yes. Celebrities, politicians, gourmets, and gourmands vied to get a table at the The Coolibah. And my dad was a gourmand. Whether it be a downscale, inexpensive meal or a grandiose, costly extravagance, it was all about the food. He would endure anything to consume the best, and a lot of it.

At the end of the meal, there was no bill. You simply left your table and walked up to his little desk behind a screen in the corner where Kovich gave you a number, and you paid it. It was a surprisingly small number—perhaps twelve to fifteen dollars per person—for what you had just been served. Kovich wanted to provide his guests with an unforgettable dining experience, and he held you captive with his food. He never advertised. You had to know his place by word of mouth.

SUNDAYS IN THE 1970s, Elmer Dills' voice blared from the AM band of our receiver. There was no Internet, no Yelp, no way to punch a few buttons and get a full restaurant rundown with eighty-five smartphone-snapped pictures of menu items. If you wanted to find a good place to eat, you had to listen to what people said. And the man we listened to was Elmer Dills.

"And this week, we are going to talk about Northern Italian," Dills, upbeat voice beckoned people to call into his show and share their dining experiences all over Southern California.

The other voices we listened to were from the *Los Angeles Times*. Instead of saying grace, my dad often read aloud the words of food writers Lois Dwan or Colman Andrews at the dinner table, while my mom invariably produced something good from the kitchen.

My mother was and is an excellent cook. Born in Burma, with her youth spent in India, her curries were perfection. But she loved all international cooking and was never bound by meat and potatoes as were so many 1970s moms. Nor was she a health food enthusiast—a movement in the seventies that produced restaurants like The Good Earth and The Source.

Although it wasn't our scene, The Source restaurant on Sunset Boulevard is worthy of mention in any account of 1970s Los Angeles...or, for that matter, any account of Los Angeles, period. Founded by Rolls Royce-driving, white suit-wearing, cult leader Father Yod, its very existence and patronage by celebrities like John Lennon and Marlon Brando financially funded the spirituality of sex, drugs, and rock and roll for a couple hundred of Yod's cult devotees in a Hollywood Hills mansion. The plentiful revenue from restaurant menu favorites like the "Aware Salad" and the "Magic Mushroom" stopped abruptly in 1974 when run-ins with authorities had the group relocating to the shores of Hawaii. There, Father Yod stepped off a 1,300-foot cliff, his first and only attempt at hang gliding, and crash-landed his way into his next incarnation.

Due to the oil crisis and inflation in the 1970s, our economy crashed as well. Continental cuisine, just like the continent for which

it was named, followed suit. And after a recession is served up, lower overhead costs often allow culinary innovation to be the next course.

NEXT TO AN OLD mattress store (an old, used mattress store) in a decaying part of Santa Monica, Michael McCarty found the ground that would sprout a Los Angeles culinary revolution.

Back in '75, McCarty came to Los Angeles, a town that, only one decade before, had finally built its own major concert hall. Most of the venerable founders whose names graced the donor walls of LA's Music Center were still hanging out at its concerts. Los Angeles haute culture was in its seedling state.

McCarty brought his own seeds from France, where he had studied at Le Cordon Bleu and École Hôtelière. He could now facilitate the growing of fresh vegetables and herbs for cooking in Southern California. With the exception of earthy-crunchy health food sandwich places, fresh didn't happen that much in 1970s dining. Even culinary education cookbooks in the early seventies said things like, "Open a number ten can..."

And then McCarty opened a can of culinary whoop-ass. At the tail end of the decade, in '79, Michael's restaurant threw wide its doors and its menu to some pretty new stuff.

"The old way was brown, mushy, and sweet," Michael said. "The new way is green, crunchy, and acidic."

Menu collaborations with chefs like Wolfgang Puck, then of Ma Maison, Jean Bertranou of L'Ermitage, and others from the just-materializing American Institute of Food and Wine created new dishes. Many of them incorporated the freshness of southern French or Italian cooking as a starting point and added a twist—a twist inspired by the Latin cuisine of the men who washed the dishes or by the Japanese culinary students who studied alongside McCarty in France. McCarty and his chefs learned from everyone. No longer were white-gloved servers pouring heavy sauces over rich, braised, meaty dishes. Here, at Michael's, you could eat mesquite-grilled quail with

jalapeño lime salsa or raw (imagine!) diver scallops with heirloom beet purée and olive oil mâche.

New art came to the kitchen, and a lot of art came to the walls of Michael's. McCarty's wife, Kim, a painter, was entrenched in the art community. At Michael's, artists came and traded art for cuisine, creating a veritable gallery inside the restaurant. And, instead of the piped-in *musac* common in seventies restaurants, Michael's played jazz—apropos for a restaurant that “riffed” on traditional food.

The outdoor garden dining area was an ironic rarity in a city known for its good weather. Young movie execs like Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Michael Eisner weren't so tied to old Hollywood or Beverly Hills money. They could be seen eating here at this Westside indoor-outdoor haven where young chefs like Jonathan Waxman and Mark Peel put their creations in front of the new, budding Los Angeles culturati.

Now, in 2016, I found myself dining at Michael's with a friend who was editing a book on Los Angeles in the 1970s. During our dinner, I reflected on my father and on all of the food experiences that he gave me as a kid in seventies. LA food had changed so much at the very place in which we were eating. Los Angeles had flexed its own regional culinary muscles, creating a veritable groundbreaking earthquake that, to this day, is still referred to as California Cuisine. It was the first New American cuisine, and Los Angeles, by the end of the 1970s, had morphed into a new American city.

RIFFLING THROUGH “THAT ROOM,” I found a newspaper clipping from the seventies with a picture of my dad. I could only assume that it was a company newspaper. Working in Downtown LA as a computer programmer for Transamerica Occidental Life Insurance, he was the unofficial restaurant expert in his office. The picture on the clipping showed my dad smiling as he lifted a fork to his mouth. For a while, after the hemorrhagic stroke, my dad could no longer engage in this simple task. And he still has some trouble remembering the names of streets and restaurants. And yet, on the way back from a

follow-up appointment at USC Hospital, as we drove through Central Los Angeles, he pointed excitedly out the window.

“That’s the Chinese restaurant where I used to take your mom when we were first married,” he said. “We would go there after boating in Echo Park.”

My dad was a “foodie” long before the term made its way into our vernacular. As I placed the clipping and menus off to the side, to be catalogued for another time, I still wasn’t sure what was at the end of the fork in the picture, but now, three months after his stroke, I was thrilled that he could pick up a fork and enjoy himself once again. Then it struck me. It was time for another Tommy’s Run. And, soon after, we stood, father and daughter, more than four decades later, at the narrow wooden counter, enjoying our hot dog and chiliburger, respectively.

Lynne Friedman, a native Angeleno, has contributed to, among other publications, the Los Angeles Times and the Malibu Times Magazine. A UCLA graduate in mathematics, her diverse career, spanning from CPA to chef, has brought her to live in Moscow, Manhattan, and Copenhagen, but she will always call Los Angeles home.