



From Cock-a-Doodle Creek to Provence

Ann Stack

TREASURE SHARING FOOD AND WINE

The difference between good and great food, and the importance of sharing the experience, became clear to me when I dined at a small bistro in Paris in the 1960's. My introduction to great food occurred much earlier on the banks of Cock-a-Doodle Creek.

"The Creek," as my family called our white clapboard family home in Annapolis, Maryland, was situated next to Cock-a-Doodle Creek, a small body of water off the Severn River which flows by the Naval Academy to the Chesapeake Bay and Atlantic Ocean. Our neighborhood of Wardour was convenient to the colonial downtown and Rookies Market, where employees and clients knew each other by name. Across the street from the market were docks where Skipjacks—used to dredge oysters—and fishing boats were moored between runs. On the wharf was our fish market where we could eat oysters on the half shell hours after being harvested, and buy fish caught that morning for dinner that night.

Naomi Randall was my family's cook at "The Creek" and it was Naomi who introduced me to great food. She prepared meals in a deceptively simple manner and presented them with a discerning eye. Naomi's crab cakes were my favorite meal, composed of the most tender and flavorful part of the crab, the back-fin. The cakes were formed with very little bread crumbs, mayonnaise, and prepared mustard, cooked to a golden brown and served with a Bib lettuce salad and a glass of chilled PUILLY FUISSE.

One especially memorable summer in Annapolis, my father—a Kentucky gentleman and retired naval officer—and I welcomed a young naval officer and a few of his Navy friends, all just off active duty. On our long front porch with its blue slate floor, comfortable green wicker furniture, and fans, we set up a low table of wood planks on saw horses and spread them with layers of newspapers, up-right rolls of paper towels, wooden mallets, and more crabs, steamed and slightly spiced, than anyone else thought we could eat. Added to the feast were tomatoes still warm from the sun, fresh yellow corn on the cob, which had been popped into boiling water and left there just long enough for the water to boil again, and lots of cold Tuborg beer. We split the crabs with our mallets,

ate the meat found there with our fingers, and sucked the meat from the legs, sweet and worth the extra effort. When we were finished, we rolled up the remains in the newspapers and passed a plate of Naomi's homemade chocolate brownies. The young naval officer became my husband, Chris, and his Navy friends were in our wedding. Forty years later, I still wonder what kept Chris coming back to "The Creek" that summer: the crabs, the brownies, the Tuborg beer, or me.

Early in our marriage, Chris and I joined my father at the agreeably worn *Hotel France et Choiseul* in Paris before driving to Provence to visit the small villa he loved called *Las Delicious*. On our last night in Paris, we went to a little bistro called *L' Escargot* where I first consciously recognized my acute appreciation for the combination of ambience, great food, complementary wine, and similarly appreciative companions. What I remember best from that evening was our introduction to cooked, fresh white asparagus. Like the French at tables near us, we used our fingers to dip the tender stalks in a delicate mayonnaise sauce. With each bite I was literally astonished by the perfectly composed combination of earth and lemon tastes. My companions appeared equally impressed, delighted and grateful to have made early reservations out of respect for the chef. My father told us that unexpected guests could distract the most talented chef with unplanned trips to the market and what if there had been no more white asparagus.

Almost my entire family returned to Provence in 1994 in memory of my father and to visit long standing French friends. Florence, our friend whose family owned *Las Delicious*, invited us for an afternoon swim and picnic. She swam to nearby rocks with a small bucket full of holes and brought back spinney little sea creatures called *ursin* for us to eat. Their exquisite, slightly salty taste made me think for a few seconds that I was part of the sea itself.

How I treasure sharing food and wine, respectfully grown, prepared and served with family and good friends! Those splendid hours connect me to the sea and to the earth, to the sun and to the rain, and to great conversations.