



LOCAL LANDMARK

Félicitations à Chez François

PART 2: CONTINUING A PATRIARCH'S DREAM | BY KAREN WASHBURN



At top: Chez François today; above: Jacques and François Haeringer
Photographs courtesy the Haeringer Family

Opposite page: River Bend Country Store
Photograph courtesy Great Falls Historical Society

Page 26: Jacques in the vegetable garden at Chez François; and page 27: The Garden Room
Photographs courtesy the Haeringer Family

In 2014, Great Falls landmark restaurant L'Auberge Chez François celebrated its 60th year in business and its 38th year in its present location. When Chef François Haeringer and his wife Marie Antoinette opened their first restaurant in 1954, it was an opportunity for him to satisfy a lifelong dream. After years of professional training with some of the premier chefs in France, and more years of cooking in restaurants owned

by others, François was ready to set out on his own. His goal was to serve well-prepared food, at affordable prices, in a comfortable atmosphere in a family-owned-and-operated restaurant. To that end, he founded Chez François in the Claridge Hotel on Connecticut Avenue. After decorating it in the style of a French country inn, he set about introducing Washingtonians to fine dining without the high prices and intimidating atmospheres often associated with French restaurants.

There were other French restaurants in the city but none that treated food or customers in the same manner as Chez François. The menu offered dishes cooked,

sauced and garnished in the style of François' native region of Alsace. The dining room was unpretentious and comfortable. The wait staff was professional and friendly and not in the least intimidating. From its beginning the restaurant was popular for both lunch and dinner. Through the years, François took over more space in the hotel and eventually opened a sidewalk terrace for outdoor dining. Two hundred and fifty people could be seated at once. Even with the added space, there were still lines of hungry diners waiting to be seated. The restaurant had a wonderful location and a large following of loyal customers that included politicians, senators, congressmen, newscasters and movie and sports stars.

After two decades of growth and success, Chez François was slated for a major change. In 1973 the Claridge was sold for demolition. The new owners of the site planned to build a large steel-and-glass office building and lease space for the restaurant but at a price that François claimed was "ridiculous." After inquiring about other locations with the same high-priced rents, he decided it was time to move to the country.

François set his sights on Great Falls, Virginia. He already owned land there, which he had purchased in the 1960s, but it was not zoned for a restaurant. And



the Great Falls Citizens Association was not likely to be amenable to a zoning change. Therefore, he would have to find an available property that was correctly zoned—no easy task since properties zoned for commercial establishments in Great Falls were few and far between. François' accountant and his lawyer strongly advised against the move to what they considered a remote location. Their fears for his success were well-founded.

Because Great Falls was considered quite far from Washington, land was still cheap. Five-acre homesites were selling for \$20,000 to \$25,000. However, it was difficult for city dwellers to get there. Access from the Beltway was via Georgetown Pike, a narrow, winding country road that traversed steep hills and low creek bottoms. Drivers found that the route straightened and leveled out past the entrance to Great Falls Park, but first-time travelers to the region often felt like they were in the middle of nowhere.

The area was marked by acres of empty farmland. Most of the large farming operations had closed except for those growing corn and hay. Others had converted to riding stables. Suburban development had only touched a few locations. The village of Great Falls at the intersection of Georgetown Pike and Walker Road consisted of an auto repair shop, a post office and bank located in the old schoolhouse, the Grange, Buck's Country Store, three gas stations, a 7-11, a firehouse, a sheet metal shop, a deserted barn and a few old farmhouses. There were no shopping centers, no stoplights, no street lights, no sidewalks and few street signs. Rush hour on Georgetown Pike was at the time appropriately named. A steady stream of

cars zipped along the road at average speeds of 45 to 50 miles an hour.

While the countryside was open and beautiful, it seemed an unlikely site for an upscale French restaurant. But it was just what François wanted. In its new location, Chez François would be a country inn. Of course he would not get much drop-in trade—the restaurant would have to become a destination for his loyal customers.

Finally, François found what he thought was the perfect place, River Bend Country Store, at the intersection of Beech Mill and Springvale roads, about three miles from the village center. The first time he went to the site, even François had to wonder if people would really want to drive up three miles on Springvale Road, a hilly

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here—my way."*

—François Haeringer

country lane, to eat dinner. The alternate route, Walker Road to Beech Mill Road, was even worse with hairpin bends added to the hilly road. However, when he saw the six-acre site, he knew it was perfect for his country inn.

Few besides François would have seen the potential in the site. Formerly an auto repair shop and now housing an antique store, a gun shop and a small delicatessen, the main building was a very unprepossessing flat-roofed cinder block rectangle completely without charm. The property also included a small hipped-roof auxiliary building that had once been a barbershop. In front of both buildings was a large expanse of gravel parking lot and a hitching rail for horses. Undeterred, François saw the prop-

erty's potential and bought it.

One of the first things François had to do was to get a special zoning exception from Fairfax County. The property, as with all Great Falls commercial sites, was split zoned. He would need an exception to be able to locate a parking lot on the acreage that was zoned residential. François went to the Great Falls Citizens Association to ask for their support. They did not object to his plan but had grave doubts as to its potential success. Their first concern was the lack of a local market to support his establishment. There were only about 1,400 households in Great Falls, and approximately 10,000 in nearby Reston. Many association members also pointed out that they did not go out to eat—hardly surprising since there were no restaurants in Great Falls.

In fact, there were very few restaurants in all of Northern Virginia. The lack of dining options was mainly due to the fact that until 1969, Virginia did not permit liquor by the drink, sales of which brought in most of the profit for dinner restaurants. And, as François was about to find out, the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Board could be very difficult to deal with.

Undaunted, François persevered and closed Chez François on April 12, 1975. He assured his loyal and appreciative customers that he would be pleased to welcome them to his new restaurant, L'Auberge Chez François, in the fall of that year. It turned out that he was overly optimistic about his opening date.

François spent the next ten months personally supervising the remodeling of the old building—gutting the interior and refitting it with a professional kitchen, a dining room, a large fireplace and restrooms; adding new



windows with functioning shutters; refinishing the exterior in white stucco accented with antique timbers; constructing a new gravel parking lot, erecting a fence and planting trees, flowerbeds and an herb garden.

The antique arched front door was moved from the downtown restaurant as were the leaded stained glass windows. Inside, the dining room was finished in the half-timber style to match the exterior. The walls were decorated with the Haeringers' collection of art and vintage French copper cookware. Long-time friend and artist Jerry Jerominek provided some new art and painted murals depicting street scenes from François' hometown of Obernai. François and Marie Antoinette ordered custom tablecloths and dishes with simple border patterns similar to those that François had grown up with. While the location would be new to his old-time customers, they would feel comfortable with its familiar ambience. It would be a place where they would want to linger and enjoy a leisurely meal.

During the long months of remodeling, François was anxious to have the work finished and open his restaurant for business. He tolerated delays for county building permits and equipment orders and endured a long wait for his license from the Virginia ABC Board. A perfectionist about his cuisine, François spent time establishing contacts with local farmers who could supply him with fresh vegetables. He wanted the best available and Hiu Newcomb's Potomac Vegetable Farm on Route 7 at Beulah Road in Vienna was able to fill that request.

Upon receiving his ABC license, François

settled on April 20, 1976, for his opening. The restaurant would offer two seatings for dinner, and reservations were to be made two weeks in advance. L'Auberge was now a destination restaurant. And because it was far from supply sources, the planning of food purchases was vital in case the kitchen ran short of a particularly popular item.

The near-disaster on opening night strongly drove that point home. François planned for about 75 diners that night with both a first and second seating. He did not advertise or formally

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announce the opening but mentioned it to those he spoke to in passing. The news spread quickly among his loyal customers who were excited to see his new place. In addition, a few Great Falls locals were quite interested in the novelty of what they thought of as a fancy French restaurant right in their own neighborhood. As calls came in, François could not say no to anyone who begged for a table. When the big night arrived, the restaurant was seriously overbooked.

François had planned that Marie Antoinette would make the pastries and that he and his sons Jacques and Robert would do the cooking. As the reservations mounted, he drafted long-time

friend and master chef Jean Pierre Goyenville from the Lion d'Or Restaurant to help cook. A few employees from the city restaurant had come to Great Falls, including long-time hostess and dining room manager Frieda Bene and Chef Mr. Oh, but most of the staff was new and inexperienced. Somehow they got through the first seating and everyone had dinner, but it did not in any way go smoothly. As the second seating began, the cooks worried about running out of food.

Fortunately for François, fate delivered a reprieve from what could have been a disaster. A thunderstorm blew in and knocked out all the electricity. At the time, Great Falls had power outages with almost every thunderstorm, and the outages usually lasted for at least three to four hours. Knowing that this would probably be the case, the staff apologized to their hungry clients and sent them on their way without dinner.

As time went on, operations returned to François's exacting standards, but it was not easy. Because there was no public transportation to Great Falls, kitchen helpers and dishwashers were hard to find. For the first few years, the Haeringers had to rely on local high school students who wanted part-time jobs. This was not a good source of labor—if there was a big dance or football game, or if the students got bad report cards, they didn't come to work.

These start-up pains were fairly well disguised, and the restaurant quickly resumed its popularity. Chez François became a popular destination for celebrating important life events. The local population proudly welcomed this addition to the community.



François remained a stern taskmaster and ran his kitchen with military precision. He did not have his employees punch a clock. Instead, they were required to greet him when they arrived and personally tell him good-bye when they left. He was also a good instructor. His common maxim: “There is only one way to do it here—my way.” This attitude created some problems with his sons as they tried to get him to change to more modern menus or systems, but he held on to his philosophy. In the meantime, some young cooks who would later make their own reputations as star chefs benefited from his training. Patrick O’Connell and his former partner Reinhardt Lynch, who later founded the Inn at Little Washington, were among those who spent time in François’s kitchen.

While François adamantly refused to embrace the changing food styles promoted by diet-conscious Americans, he did give in to a few changes. Jacques finally convinced him that there was not much of a market among modern diners for foods such as sweetbreads and brains. François also turned to native products to improve on classics. When a dish called for a fish such as pike that he could only get frozen, he would substitute fresh rockfish. He added items to the menu that used Chesapeake Bay crabmeat and served shad roe in season.

An outdoor dining garden was a popular addition to the restaurant, and another dining room, the garden room, was added in 1979. Its timber frame was salvaged from local 18th-century barns. It wasn’t quite finished for the New Year’s Eve celebration that year, which was

a pity because the Haeringers could have filled every table. Two weeks before the holiday, the phone was busy all morning and there was a line of hopeful patrons at the front door.

Those who got reservations found the dining experience to be worth the wait. The food, service and ambience were superb. Many of the diners were Great Falls residents who enjoyed greeting each other from one table to the next. When dinner was over, Frieda opened the doors to the new room. It was chilly, with unfinished walls and a plywood floor, but she had set up a record player so everyone could dance.

Through the years, the restaurant has proved that consistency of quality and style will draw repeat customers. On that point François was correct. He was able to add another small dining room in 1992. By then he was long past the age when most people would have retired, especially from such a demanding job that required him to be at work six days a week. He had achieved his lifelong dream of a family-owned and operated French country inn. His wife wrote the daily menu and did the bookkeeping. Sons Jacques and Robert were chefs in the kitchen, and son Paul was in charge of the dining room with Frieda. François still decided what was offered on the menu every day and remained a hands-on cook. No dish was allowed to be served before he personally tasted it and made any required adjustments. Robert once told his father, “You’re never going to retire. You’re just going to fall into the onion soup one day and disappear.”

While he was always welcoming and unfailingly courteous, François was most comfortable in his kitchen. And in spite of the delicious dishes that he concocted every day, his own favorite snack was Spam and a beer. He balked when styles shifted in the 1990s and chefs were expected to be showmen. François didn’t want to roam around the dining room greeting customers or hold cooking demonstrations or write cookbooks. Fortunately Jacques was able to do all of those things and add another piece of modern restaurant culture to the traditions guarded by his father.

François never did retire. At age 91, after a day at the restaurant, he fell and fractured his hip. There were related complications and he passed away the following day, June 3, 2010, leaving a wonderful legacy in Chez François.

The restaurant still serves meals in François’ traditional style using his recipes. Jacques is the Chef de Cuisine and Paul manages the dining rooms. Together they supervise 87 employees. A few changes have been made—ones of which François would no doubt have approved. A large vegetable garden has been planted on the acreage behind the restaurant, and much of the produce served in the summer months is homegrown. Jacques opened a brasserie downstairs in 2011. The same quality of food is served there as in the upstairs dining room but in a more casual atmosphere and featuring an à la carte menu. The quiet bar is a comfortable place to meet friends. And throughout the entire establishment, the influence of François’ exacting standards still prevails. é