

THE GOURMET, THE GOURMAND AND THE MASTER CHEF

Man and the animals are merely a passage and channel for food, a tomb for other animals, a haven for the dead, giving life by the death of others, a coffer full of corruption. Leonardo da Vinci

*Who doth ambition shun,
And loves to live i' the sun,
Seeking the food he eats,
And pleased with what he gets.
Shakespeare*

*It's food too fine for angels: yet come, take
And eat thy fill! It's Heaven's sugar cake.
Edward Taylor's Sacramental Meditations*

*Every cook has to learn how to govern the state.
Vladimir Ilyich Lenin*

*God sends meat, and the Devil sends cooks.
John Taylor*

Je m'appelle Pierre Fourchette. Excuse my French. My name is Pierre Fourchette. Actually that is the name I am known by. It is not my real name. I come from a very humble background. Since food was always in short supply I developed an extremely fond appreciation for the culinary arts and resolved early in my life to become a chef. I successfully achieved this goal. Although I am not French no one is aware of this deception. I continue this pretext to maintain my reputation as one of the world's leading chefs. As such I am in great demand. I am not associated with any well known restaurant. I prefer to run a small catering service. My clientele has been carefully selected. They all have one thing in common. They are all inordinately wealthy. Otherwise they would never be able to afford my services.

As just mentioned, I came from humble beginnings and was a child of adversity. I was short, squat and overweight, in other words rather unattractive. I was an only child with a single and very caring, nurturing mother. While frequently food was scarce she strove to make sure that I never went hungry. She was an excellent cook specializing in ethnic peasant food. She was expert in the use of spices, garlic, onions, hot peppers and anything else available to enhance the flavor of what she put on the table. Fortunately these products were readily and cheaply obtainable, such as tough cuts of meat, fowl, fruits and vegetables. I came to adore both my mother and her meals. Unfortunately, she never had enough for herself.

I disappointed her because I quit school in my mid teens. I later returned to my studies which made an important contribution to my career as you will eventually appreciate. I yearned to provide her with sufficient funds so that she could obtain suitable clothing and enough food to sustain both of us. Whatever I earned was turned over to her.

I started my professional career by working in a restaurant as a dishwasher. This turned out to be a valuable training ground since it afforded me an opportunity to educate myself about the necessary infrastructure intrinsic to a successful eatery. My diligent efforts were recognized by the owner of a prestigious dining establishment. He offered me a position as a waiter which I gladly accepted. This allowed me to learn how to please the clientele and recognize the sort of foods that various types of patrons appreciated. After all, the fussiest customers are those who frequent restaurants and rightly so, especially those establishments whose prices are not modest. After about six months I asked to work in the kitchen as an assistant chef. My request was granted and it was during this period that I learnt more about how to prepare food than I ever had before or since.

The Master Chef indulged my passion for wanting to become a regular chef by allowing me some opportunities to create original repasts. My mother's culinary skills then came to mind. I had noticed and remarked upon the fact that strong spices, plentiful amounts of garlic and onions and herbs such as oregano and young dill, were just about never used. Exotic sauces blending butter, cream, wine, foreign cheese and mild condiments were the usual order of the day. I resolved to change all that.

I had made a list of my favorite dishes that my mother made for me. I had garnered a slew of her recipes. This turned out to be more difficult than I had anticipated since each dish she prepared was made with whatever ingredients readily and cheaply available. In other words the so-called same dish was never exactly the same. However there were nearly always common components. I learnt to rely on them and upon my own imagination.

The first item was a cold soup consisting of sour grass, green onions, cucumbers, sour cream and young dill. This was a peasant version of Vichyssoise and as far as I am concerned far superior. If one was desirous of a hot soup I prepared a sweet and sour cabbage borsht laced with cubes of meat, leaves of cabbage, red beets to provide both taste and color and lemon juice balanced by sugar. This was my favorite soup during the cold winter months. My first *pièce de résistance* was nothing more than a mish-mash of potatoes, carrots, spices, hot peppers, loads of garlic, a plentiful amount of onions and as many pieces of cut up chicken with none of the fat removed. On other occasions the chicken would be replaced by stewing meat or by cubed lamb or pork. The trick here was to cook this composite very slowly over a number of hours. Actually the peasants of my youth would continuously cook this mixture and as it got consumed replenish it by adding more of its ingredients to it.

Before allowing these items to be put on the menu the Master Chef sampled them. He admitted that they were not his 'cup of tea' but felt they were original and tasty enough to try them out on the restaurant's clientele. To say that they were successful has to be the understatement of the century. They quickly became the dishes most requested so that it did not take too long before the restaurant became known as the best ethnic eatery in the city. I was immediately appointed to become the Master Co-Chef. I will not elaborate further or provide recipes for my quasi creations. They are available in many of the leading cook books. However there is one ingredient that is never listed where recipes are provided. Good food has to be prepared with an abundance of 'love'.

By this time I was earning a great deal of money. I could afford to provide my mother with all that she needed and wanted. However I continued to learn from her. She insisted

on cooking my meals which I still took great pleasure in with increasing fervor. Also despite my physical shortcomings I was having unanticipated success with members of the opposite sex. My life had become exceedingly pleasurable. I was at the top of my profession, yet there was still something missing which I could not put my finger on. While still working, I entered the academic world to educate myself about the physics and chemistry of cooking. In short order I obtained a related degree.

I then decided to broaden my horizons. I left my job and opened an exclusive catering service which I still run. I chose this approach because I did not want to compete with the establishment that had been of great help in shaping my career. My new customers were extremely wealthy with a great appreciation of my culinary skills. This also turned out to be inordinately triumphant and yet I still felt that I had not accomplished what I really desired without knowing what it truly was.

While there was no need for me to toil in my kitchen since I had all the carefully selected help I required, I still enjoyed playing around with various ingredients to try and create new taste sensations as well as making my meals as nutritious and healthy as possible. The chemistry and biochemistry I had learnt provided me with potential additives. I kept a detailed record of each experiment.

One day while completely alone in the kitchen I found the flavor of my latest brew to be unlike anything I had ever before experienced. I decided to test it on two of my most obnoxious customers. One fancied himself a gourmet who was always telling me how to improve my creations. Of course I ignored his suggestions. The other was a disgusting fat and slovenly female who literally never stopped eating or so it appeared to me. She was the most extreme example of a gourmand I had ever come across. Both had inherited enormous wealth and had never done anything constructive in their lives.

I decided to break a rule. I invited them to jointly sample my latest discovery together in my private dining room. They were flattered and so gladly accepted. They started by behaving as expected, each being highly critical of the other's demeanor and table manners, while voraciously gobbling down what I had prepared. Then I noticed some subtle changes in their behavior. The gourmand started by eating more slowly than I had ever seen her and the gourmet became less and less picky and began stuffing himself more or less as the gourmand had. I learnt that within a week the previous gourmand was behaving like a gourmet and the reverse for the earlier gourmet. While they continued to be my customers I was astonished to discover that the amounts they ordered were in direct contrast as to what they used to. Of equal shock was the change in their appearances and their manners. The once gourmand easily lost about one hundred pounds and actually became an attractive woman, at least physically. The reverse was true for the once gourmet.

I couldn't help but wonder if somehow I was responsible for this astonishing metamorphosis. Was it possible that the concoction I had created and served had made them very vulnerable to strong suggestions? I was determined to find out. I fed some to my mother while strongly urging her to stop cooking for me and to live a luxurious life. I had tried to convince her of this over a long period of time but to no avail. Much to my surprise my mixture worked, although her idea of fancy living in no way resembled the manner in which most rich people passed their leisure time. I then gently tried it on certain members of my staff to alter their work habits. Again it turned out to be a notable

success. I had similar results every time I tried it. I also learnt that a one time intake had permanent results.

I realized that I had the means of altering the behavior of anyone to whom I administered my concoction. This was a power previously unheard of in mankind's history. I decided to use it for humanity's benefit. Besides being very wealthy, some of my clients were immensely powerful in both the halls of industry and government. Also, I was frequently hired to prepare banquets for visiting foreign dignitaries and various Heads of State and Governments. I was longing and hoping for a world with a far greater measure of equity, justice, freedom and especially for world wide peace. The results of my efforts were mixed. Some policies both domestic and international did have happy effects. Unfortunately most altered politicians, from just about anywhere, were either defeated or assassinated by their compatriots. The old adage that, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions", was certainly applicable. Luckily for me no one ever discovered that I had been the force behind these changes. I am sure that I would have been arrested and executed. Professionally I remain one of the world's greatest chefs.

POSTSCRIPT

I continue to use my innovative concoction but judiciously and benevolently to reform those whose behavior is self destructive. I know that I cannot resolve the world's problems. However, on occasion, when I am preparing a banquet where some of the guests have a history of being cruel vicious tyrants responsible for the deaths of many innocents, I arrange for them to consume my invention and undergo its transformative effects.

To ensure that no one ever finds out what the recipe of my creation is, I destroyed all my experimental notes. The only place that it continues to reside is in my mind.

I am currently married to a most beautiful woman, one whom I absolutely adore. A little while ago, I accidentally partook of my concoction while supping with her. I not only adore her but I am now her eternal slave. Whatever she wants, she gets.

Jack Basuk

July 18, 2007

<http://www.jackbasuk.com>