

How I Became a Chef

by JOSEPH DONON in *CULINARY REVIEW, The Chef's National Magazine*

The chef used to come in the kitchen around ten o'clock, making his menus, checking the orders, going over the work with his first assistant, called *premier commis*. His name was Aristide Blime, a man in his twenties who was a master chef in his own right. He was really my boss as we had to work in full cooperation and of all those I was to work with, he is the one whom I remember as the most friendly man I have ever known in my career. He showed me the Paris I did not know, Paris at night, Montmartre, etc.

It is at the Mexican Embassy that I had my first contact with Spanish and Mexican cookery. The Ambassador had brought with him a Mexican cook, a lovely Mexican girl, who prepared every day a Mexican or a Spanish dish and this was part of the menu, arranged so as not to disturb the harmony of the menu. Although she did not speak French she was quite at ease in the kitchen preparing her specialties. My impression was that she was a fine cook in her own right. One of her prized dishes was a chicken sauté Valencia Style with ground chili peppers, saffron and paprika profusely used. It was very popular with the guests and it had all the pep a palate could stand.

After several months in this position I started to look around for another one as a first commis. My stay at the Embassy had been most enlightening and rewarding in my endeavor to learn, but while reading books such as Urbain Dubois I could see that there was a great deal more to learn to become a chef. Although I did not belong to any cook's organizations I had become acquainted with young commis of my age and learned all the gossip of the trade. So and so was changing positions, etc., so one day I learned that a Mr. Guigo, chef for the Marquis de Panisse Passis, was looking for a first commis with full knowledge of pastry. I managed to get off for two hours and went to see him. At that time one could not get a position without being recommended by the chef where one was working, so I had to break the news to my chef at the Embassy that I wanted to leave to take a position as first commis with Mr. Guigo, chef for the Marquis de Panisse Passis. After a consultation with his assistant, Aristide Blime, he acceded to my request. Fortunately he knew chef Guigo so I could start at my new position within the next two weeks. I was far from knowing that this move up the ladder was to be the momentous turning point of my whole career.

Leaving the Mexican Embassy at Neuilly, Seine, to take my new position with Mr. Guigo, chef for the Marquis de Panisse Passis, 24 Avenue Marceau, was financially quite a step forward for me as my salary was to be 120 francs a month, with my room and my working clothes laundered and one afternoon and evening off twice a month. Chef Guigo, a man in his fifties, had been chief saucier at the Palace Hotel nearby, Place de l'Etoile, for many years and had decided to finish his career in a private home where the work was less exacting.

The Marquis de Panisse Passis had three estates, at 24 Avenue Marceau, Paris, "Le Chateau de Beauplant" in the Vallée de Chevreuse, Seine-et-Oise, and the third, in the south of France, the Château de Villeneuve, Villeneuve-Loubet, Alpes Maritimes. The family spent early fall and early spring in their home in Paris, summer was spent at the Château de Beauplant, and the winter was spent at Villeneuve.

These stays in the different residences were extremely interesting from the culinary point of view and contrary to the open house of an embassy, there was selection and austerity at every function. In these times there were no frozen foods, cooking was done with what the surrounding countryside had to offer, all fresh of course, and each place had its specialties.

The Chateau de Beauplant, a very large estate dominating the Chevreuse Valley with its large lake full of crawfish (ecrevisses), carp, eels and brochet. For meat we had milk-fed calves (veal), with all their different parts, young domestic rabbits (lapereaux), milk-fed pigs and all the spring vegetables and early fruit. Villeneuve had all the fish from the Mediterranean crayfish (Langouste), loup, rouget,

etc. the nonats or blanchailles, a very tiny fish much smaller than our whitebait, native brook trout from the "Gorge du Loup," a torrent nearby. While in Paris we had, of course, all the different meat and game and fall vegetables and fruit plus greenhouse products. Entertainment was moderate and mostly small dinners of from 8 to 20 people; and weekly receptions and tea parties.

Chef Guigo, a native of Antibes, Alpes Maritimes, had all the characteristics of the "Mérional" (name given to those natives of the south of France). He had a good tenor voice, was very fond of opera; attending all the premières when possible and singing some of the arias to our delight. It is with him that I learned some of the very fine basic ways of making stocks and sauces. Not being married, he was, I suppose, like all bachelors, methodical and meticulous, fond of himself, still with the human touch and understanding of people of southern France.

His temper was put to the test one day by the following incident which even to this day I have never forgotten. One afternoon he sent me to "Les Halles" market to buy fresh asparagus. He gave me 200 francs (\$40.00) to pay for them. This asparagus was for a special dinner for the next day. On my way to the market and having some time to spare, I stopped at the Place des Invalides where there was a circus and other attractions. I leisurely walked around relaxing at the sound of music and enjoying the crowd. I stopped in front of a shooting gallery. I started shooting and was not doing too badly when a man next to me said that he would match me for a glass of beer, and I naively said all right. Being the winner, I could not refuse to go with him to the next café and partake of a glass of beer.

While sipping my beer and watching the heavy rain falling, another man came over and addressed the man I was with as if he knew him well, telling him he was looking for a partner to play a game of cards called piquet to pass the time while waiting for the rain to stop. As I finished drinking my beer, he invited me to come to watch them play. As I still had a little time to spare, I didn't see anything wrong, so I went with them. After a while, one of the three players remembered that he had an appointment and left so I was asked to take his place.

I won't go into details of the story of the game, but 25 minutes later my 200 francs plus a few francs of mine were gone and also an umbrella that I had with me. I left the café dizzy and completely broken-hearted, and the thought came to my mind that the Seine River that was nearby was the only way out for me. It was still raining hard. I was alone talking to myself, and finally I woke up as if from a nightmare, and the whole tragedy came to me in its cruel reality. What was I to do? I could not go back without the asparagus and it was getting late. I certainly was in need of a friend, but who? I had two uncles — brothers of my mother — one in Vincennes, chief of the state police, and the other an electrical engineer living on the Avenue Daumenil. As he lived the nearest, I hurried to his house and fortunately found him at home. I told him my story. He did not say a word of blame to me. He just went to get 200 francs which he gave to me ordering me to go and get my asparagus and go back to my work. I did this in short order, still talking to myself.

As I was late and looked depressed, Mr. Guigo asked me what was wrong. I answered him that I would tell him after dinner, as I was sure that he would discharge me. After hearing my story he said that the thing to do now was to pay back my uncle, that he would lend me the money if I promised never to gamble again. I promised him and to this day I have never gambled; this experience completely cured me.

It took me four months to reimburse chef Guigo to whom I was deeply indebted. My foolishness could have made me lose my position and the opportunity to go to the South of France, a dream that I had had in my mind for years. Finally the order came. We were to leave for the Château de Villeneuve, at Villeneuve-Loubet on the Mediterranean, nine kilometers from Nice.