



Pilot Light

how to distinguish yourself

Our annual May pilgrimage to the National Restaurant Association show in Chicago—this marks our 23rd straight year—now makes us feel like a couple of veteran reunion-goers you see smiling and waving along the parade route from an open vintage car.

Looking back, specific personalities, happenings, and transitions stand out in sharp relief. So what remains indelible? The cyclonic Lake Michigan rains, 12 years ago, that failed to dampen the first annual Share Our Strength/*Food Arts* Championship BBQ & Cookout, which by now has raised well over a million dollars to fight hunger. But above all, the incessant evolution of Chicago itself, from the stunning transformation of the miles-long corridor connecting Michigan Avenue hotelism to the once troglodyte-friendly McCormick Place, now an airy glass act (next step: get the center's foodservice act together!), to the restaurant scene's acrobatic leap from muscular Midwestern to world-class "destination" status.

Although NRA Show press conferences tend to blur quickly, for us the most memorable one still pulses after 20 years. Ostensibly, it had been called to announce the founding of a non-profit association somewhat cryptically named DiRoNA and wholly dedicated to "raising fine dining standards and promoting fine dining throughout the U.S.A., Canada, and Mexico." Making the presentation were its newly formed board of directors, whose stone-faced delivery, at least to those of us who'd already learned the backstory, suggested a senior war council responding to barbarian attack.

All of DiRoNA's founding members had been recipients of the 1989 Travel Holiday Award in the fine dining category. Bestowed annually by the era's premier travel magazine (originally simply *Holiday*) upon restaurants picked by food and drink editor Robert Balzer, for 36 years the Fine Dining Award had endured as the most prestigious—and most business boosting—token of recognition

quality-driven restaurateurs could display at their doorways.

Then, without warning, following the magazine's sale to *Reader's Digest*, an inexplicably wounding decision was made to drop the fine dining category from the future awards program. Seen as a professional betrayal, this elicited not only collective outrage but the swift activist steps taken by the high-end restaurant community.

In any case, the new organization's eponymous logo answered the question of the most effective way to distinguish your operation as a distinguished restaurant. Armed with the knowledge that mastery loves company, band together with other like-minded, uncompromisingly aspirational restaurateurs, install a third party inspection system, and brand name the organization "DiRoNA," as in, yes, Distinguished Restaurants of North America. So, happy 20th anniversary to all you DiRoNA-ites old and new convening in September in Toronto! And many thanks to Toronto's courtly restaurant elder statesman **John Arena**, DiRoNA's initial board chairman, for his clarifying e-mails.

Not that you *have* to be a joiner, however illustrious the affiliation, to become a restaurateur of singular distinction. Witness our late friend, Jovan Trbojevic, whose suavely autocratic operational style and unshakable personal tastes led him to become the widely acknowledged number one restaurateur in Chicago for an impressive span of years.

Until his death this January, at age 89 in Chicago, Jovan Trbojevic supplied the ultimate evidence that personal distinction calls for deep reservoirs of uncommon personal experience. Son of a royalist Serbian senator, he was born in 1920 in the then kingdom of Yugoslavia. Before being sent to school in Austria, where daily life, in all aspects, from polished social forms to vibrant culinary traditions, was still pursued as if the glory days of Franz Josef's Austro-Hungarian Empire had not been extinguished, home tu-



Jovan Trbojevic, trailblazing cosmopolite.



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tors expanded Jovan's language repertoire to add fluent French and English to his Serbian and German. Here, where his love of food was born, cooking was done by skilled domestics; much of the produce came from his grandmother's agricultural estates.

At the outset of World War II, Jovan, barely 20, was a subaltern in the Royal Yugoslav Army. In 1941, to evade capture by Axis invaders, he joined Britain's Royal Fleet, making a getaway by submarine to Crete, and from there to Egypt, where, after learning some Arabic, he worked as a multilingual spy before being picked to be one of four Yugoslavs trained to parachute into the Bosnian mountains for a couple of years, with enough gold to support the Royalist Chetnik soldiers fighting for the king. However, when the British switched allegiance to Tito and his communist resistance, the Royalist force disbanded and Jovan literally "walked away from the war," according to his beloved wife, Maggie, eventually making his way on foot, wearing a suit and carrying a little briefcase in a storm, over the Alps into Switzerland. After interning him, the British legation, impressed by his poise and linguistic abilities, invited him to become an officer. Finding himself in the right place, Jovan enrolled in the internationally renowned Lausanne Hotel School, doing all three sections: service, kitchen, and management, before going on to *stage* at **The Palace Hotel** in St. Moritz as a captain. And, oh yes, meanwhile debriefing German soldiers in Frankfurt for the Americans, for whom he'd worked in the early CIA but no longer cared to. The Americans nevertheless found him a job in Milwaukee and a bed in an absent CIA agent's family home there. Feeling completely stifled, he fled first to Chicago, then to the east and back again. And these are just the first few chapters.

The opening of his legendary nouvelle cuisine Le Perroquet in 1973 in Chicago would bring national acclaim. Jovan's goal, according to Maggie, had been "to introduce the incredibly fresh, bright, exquisite flavors" he admired in France's nascent nouvelle cuisine movement. A gifted saucier with a "knack for adjusting and creating," his biggest joy, Maggie reflects, "was making his diners happy with the menus and atmosphere he created."

In turn, diners were expected to behave. Jovan's upbringing and limited patience disallowed the sort of frat house incivility that passes for social exuberance today, to the point where his next restaurant project, **Les Nomades**, one of our all-time favorites, opened in 1978 as a dollar-a-year private club ("Why just a dollar?" we later asked. "To keep the gorillas out," came the reply). Gorillas could be guilty of an assortment of crimes: table hopping, intrusively loud conversations, spreading business papers across the table, not handling their alcohol, etc. Any of these could bring permanent banishment. As for food critics, he once told dear mutual friend Lotte Doria Vuksan, "I will not have those mongrels come into my restaurant!"

At Les Nomades, under the Trbojevic regime (he sold it in 1993 to **Mary Beth and Roland Liccioni** but kept ownership of the building), the irresistible food reflected both his Balkan/Austro-Hungarian upbringing and cosmopolitan peregrinations. There was always a perfect bouillon and a cassoulet. His personal favorite was stuffed fermented cabbage with smoked ribs and sausages. The taller of us gravitated to the cocotte of pheasant and sauerkraut; Croatian Lotte Vuksan loved the Serbian beef with sour cream and gently sautéed cucumbers.

The physical atmosphere of Les Nomades, evoking the 1930s and '40s of Sydney Greenstreet and Marlene Dietrich, was matchless, the sort of place you hope the *Orient-Express* will deposit you but doesn't. Oak floors, zinc bar, multiple mirrors, graphic artist Maggie's Portuguese tile murals, canvas linen-snapped paneling ("we hated reverberating walls"), and little shuffles of tarot-sized à la minute menu cards she hand penned late everyday. Sometimes the Balkan magic completely engulfed us, as once, over a predinner bottle of Champagne with Jovan and the Vuksans, we were party to the following conversation: "Did you go to Palm Springs to the funeral of the archduke?" "Mmm." "The wife, she was there? Did she kill him?"

That'll remain a Chicago memory we won't forget.

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