

A gourmet cook's touch makes bar grub quite the grab

By D.Z. Stone

WAS A YOUNG TEEN when Blackie the Bookie came into the bar kitchen and joked to my mother, "You gonna let her cook after she almost killed Big Eddie with that cheeseburger?"

Blackie was reminding my mother of the time she let me use that new Kraft cheese instead of the kind that went on the slicing machine. Heck, I was only 11 and thought pre-sliced was more high-class. Each slice was individually wrapped. Fortuitously it was 1965, before anyone thought to sue over an honest mistake. Besides, Eddie already had a vodka or three in him, so he didn't feel much when he bit into the molten plastic.

Amazingly, my mother let me back in the kitchen after the cheese incident. When I was older she even let me experiment with my "gourmet" specials. Maybe it had to do with her secret wish to turn the place into a classy restaurant. I don't think she ever expected to become the cook in a gin mill like Puffy's Tavern after my father bought out his brother, Eddie, aka Puffy. As for my father, he figured I knew what I was doing, since I was in advanced classes.

Puffy's was a bar in Mineola frequented by mailmen, cops, reporters, plumbers, lawyers, caddies and stockbrokers as well as Democrats from party headquarters and Republicans who worked for the county and took four-hour lunches. Amid the male clientele, Old Helen held forth from the second stool near the front door. She was a former bar owner who smoked her Pall Malls as if her life depended on it.

My mother worked the kitchen making lunches every weekday: burgers, sandwiches, soup and a hot special. People loved her food; they came from miles away. I, on the other hand, received mixed reviews.

Crazy Andy, who every Friday would sit in a booth and relive World War II ("McCann put your head down. Bokorsky cover the right flank"), sent back my gazpacho because it was cold. I expected an argument when I refused to heat it up, but Andy took it in stride and said something about maybe enjoying my newfound sophistication.

Tony Tuna was always perplexed when he would see one of my specials listed on the chalkboard. He would ask, "What the hell is this?" — to which my father would reply, "What the hell do you care?" I was insulted and told my father to please tell Tony it was chicken vindaloo.

Every so often my father would remind me that the goal in making specials was to make money, "so don't go wild with expensive ingredients."

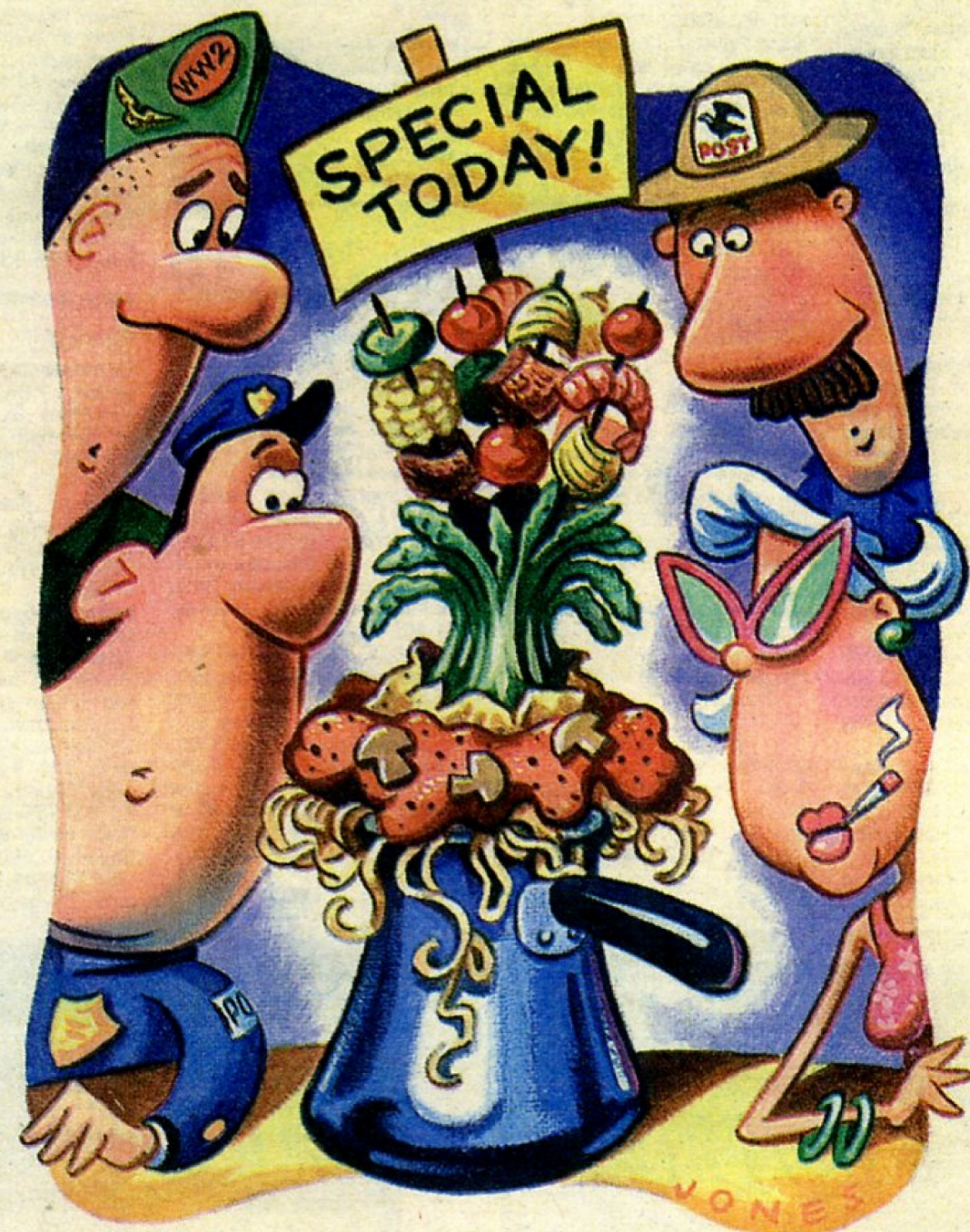


Illustration by Larry Jones

Fortunately, my mother was there to rescue failures. When my delicate homemade pasta melted in the pot of boiling water, she added crushed tomatoes and spices and called it imperial soup. It sold out.

I imagine the customers were overjoyed when I went away to college. But when I came home on vacation, Crazy Andy shouted, "Look who's here!" Big Eddie said something about the joint's going downhill without me. Not to worry, I assured everyone, I was back and even had a recipe direct from Williamsburg: peanut soup.

When Tony Tuna heard this he asked, "Do you think I'm a rabbit?" The entire bar then discussed whether rabbits ate peanuts. Maybe it was elephants. Ah, who cares. Time for another round.

My mother had many specials, but a favorite was chicken, rice and sour gravy, a recipe from my Polish grandmother. It's something my grandmother made after she got off the boat and secured a position as a cook for a wealthy family. She was 14.

Chicken, Rice And Sour Gravy

1 (3-pound) chicken, cut into pieces

- Salt and pepper to taste
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) butter
- 1 large yellow onion, sliced thinly
- 1 chicken bouillon cube dissolved in 1 cup boiling water
- 1 pint sour cream at room temperature
- 2 tablespoons flour
- Cooked rice, to serve four

 1. Season the chicken pieces with salt and pepper.
 2. Melt the butter in a large pot. Saute the onions until soft. Remove from pot and set aside. Add the chicken and brown slowly in the butter. When the chicken is brown, return the onions to the pot. Add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the bouillon, cover and simmer 1 hour, turning the chicken and adding bouillon as needed to keep the pan from drying out.
 3. While the chicken is cooking, blend the sour cream with the flour.
 4. Turn off heat. Remove the chicken from the pot. Add a spoonful of liquid from the pot to sour cream and mix well. Repeat until the sour cream is warm. Slowly add the mixture to pot, stirring well.
 5. Bring to boil, then immediately reduce heat to low. Return chicken to pot, then serve immediately over rice with sour cream sauce. Makes 4 servings. ■

D.Z. Stone is a freelance writer.