



## Freemasons of Fine Dining

### The Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs

by ROLAND FLAMINI

On the evening this past November, 60 men and women gathered in the Washington, DC, restaurant Rogue 24, a converted garage located in an obscure alley. The décor was minimalist, with exposed brick walls and long communal tables, but the food—ah, well, the food was another story. Working out of a kitchen located in the center of the dining room, chef R.J. Cooper and his team produced a stream of high-quality, inventive courses in a style that a leading local food writer described as “Nouveau American.” Typical was the dish combining (to quote the menu) “swordfish, ink, sea bean, blood orange and olive.”

The Chaîne des Rôtisseurs' 2012 General Assembly included a lavish dinner at Hôtel Le Meurice prepared by Michelin three-star chef Yannick Alléno, himself a member of the *confrérie*.



Greystone's historic Barrel Room in the Napa Valley provided an intimate backdrop for the Chaîne's national wine society convention this past spring. LEFT: The Chaîne des Rôtisseurs takes its name from the guild of goose roasters founded in 1248; pictured here, a culinary scene from the Bayeux Tapestry.

One staff member surveyed the diners—many of whom wore distinctive colored ribbons festooned with gold chains and badges—and remarked that the evening would be a big challenge. “Tonight, we have a roomful of experts,” he said.

He wasn't far wrong, either. The occasion was a night out for members of the Washington branch of the Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, an international food and wine society dedicated to preserving the traditions of fine dining—traditions that have been traced back to the 13th-century Burgundian court. With professional chefs as well as other members of the hotel, food and wine businesses making up more than a third of the Chaîne's membership, R.J. Cooper knew he was cooking for his peers.

It was less than a week before the U.S. presidential elections, and talk at the tables predictably centered on ... how well the red Burgundy (2006 Louis Jadot, Clos des Ursules) went with the swordfish, and how beautifully the Margaux (2000 Château d'Issan) paired with the heavenly chocolate dessert. At the close, the seven-course tasting meal got a round of applause and praise from Paul S. Haar, Bailli (head) of the Washington Bailliage (chapter).

And to think it was a roast leg of Normandy mutton that started it all.

Or rather, the man who roasted that leg of mutton. That was Jean Valby, a French journalist born in the Burgundy region but living in Paris in the immediate post-war



## The society is dedicated to preserving a tradition of fine dining that dates back to the 13th-century Burgundian court.

period, when food was scarce and strict rationing was still in force.

According to Chaîne history, Valby one day managed to get his hands on a leg of mutton, which he roasted on a skewer and invited two friends to share. One was Dr. Auguste Bécart, the other Maurice Edmond Sailland, the illustrious food writer who used the pseudonym Curnonsky. The

three men expressed their concern that food shortages—meat in particular—were causing an entire generation to grow up with very limited first-hand knowledge of the finer points of cooking and roasting, and even less appreciation of quality.

That evening, as Valby remembered it later, he and his friends decided “to create an association of people devoted to bringing

gastronomy back into everyday life.” They based the new group on the traditions and practices of the old royal guild of master goose roasters that flourished from 1248 to 1789, when the French Revolution dissolved all such organizations.

The resulting Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs débüté during Easter week 1950. Valby was named president, and the first 120 members were inducted at Paris's Hôtel Lutetia on January 25, 1951. They were presented with silk *rubans*—now color-coded to distinguish the various ranks—and gold chains with engraved medallions. Since then, the Chaîne has expanded to include more

than 80 national Bailliages, some in such far-flung places as China, Saudi Arabia and Russia; total membership stands at 23,000.

Some 6,000 of that number are in the United States, which has 130 chapters (the first was founded in New York in 1960). The organization boasts a thicket of ranks and offices, each with a French title, and admission is by invitation only. Members may attend any of hundreds of local, regional, national and international events; there are also special travel opportunities, such as cruises and tours organized around Chaîne events abroad.

From the start, the Chaîne attracted a large number of food and wine professionals. Julia Child, California vintner Robert Mondavi and hotelier Barron Hilton were members, as was—surprisingly—Ronald Reagan, inducted while governor of California. Says Ariane Daguin, owner of D'Artagnan, the U.S.-based purveyor of fowl and game, “My Chaîne membership provides me the opportunity to learn what the discriminating consumer is looking for in our products; it's a window onto the world of knowledgeable gourmets.”

Valby clearly envisioned the Chaîne as a quintessentially French society rooted in the gastronomy of France, but global reach and cultural diversity has broadened its scope. The Washington chapter, for example, has held Chinese dinners. And the Australian Chaîne's Web site proclaims its dedication “to preserving and raising the standards of culinary arts not just in French cuisine but in all the great cuisines of the world.” (All of which may not have sat well with Valby, whose conservative leanings once led him to

declare that nouvelle cuisine “is not new cuisine, it's disgusting cuisine.”)

Washington Bailli Paul Haar, who practices law in both DC and France, maintains that regardless of this evolution, the Chaîne's French influence is alive and well. “Our dinners are all about fine food and wine and creativity, about the grounding in precise technical cooking, all of which are very French.” Equally important, he says, is the continued emphasis on good company and conversation, a Gallic tradition that he calls the “spiritual” part of the dining experience.

Every year, members have the opportunity to reconnect with the organization's roots during the International General Assembly, which is always held in France. This past May, some 500 members spent three days in Paris, meeting, sightseeing, going on excursions and of course dining. “There is always a great ambiance at these events; friendship is a big part of our organization,” says Secretary General Philippe Desgeorges. “As our name indicates, we are all links in a chain of fraternity that extends around the world.”

Every evening was a Michelin-star-studded affair, with dinners prepared by Yannick Alléno (a Chaîne member himself) at the Hôtel Meurice, Eric Frechon at the Hôtel Bristol and Guy Krenzer at the Pré Catalan. Once again, the Chaîne had rallied around Antonin Carême's famous declaration, posted prominently on its Web site: “When we no longer have good cooking in the world, we will have no literature, nor high and sharp intelligence, nor amicable gathering, nor social harmony.”

### CHAÎNE OUTREACH

In 2008, the Chaîne founded the Association Caritative de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs (ACCR), a nonprofit with the mission of helping the needy around the world. To date, many of their efforts have focused on feeding the hungry; in addition, they have started culinary schools in Portugal and South Africa to give the underprivileged a chance to acquire career skills.

Each year, the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs also organizes competitions for young chefs and sommeliers, with local chapters coaching candidates as they participate on regional and national levels before going on to the ultimate international competition. In 2011, Reilly Meehan, a recent graduate of Oregon Coast Culinary Institute (OCCI), became the first American to win the title of “Best Young Chef in the World.” And in 2012, Christopher P. Bates, 31, general manager and executive chef at Hotel Fauchère in Milford, Pennsylvania, won “Best Young Sommelier in the World.” The U.S. Chaîne has also established a foundation that offers scholarships for culinary and oenological students.

This article originally appeared  
in the Winter 2012-13 issue of France Magazine.



Founded in 1985, France Magazine is published  
by the nonprofit French-American Cultural Foundation.

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