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Arts & Entertainment

Columns

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by Donna Newman -

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*Chef Guy Reuge. Photo by Donna Newman*

**By Donna Newman**

Often referred to as France's gift to Long Island, Guy Reuge, executive chef of Mirabelle Restaurant and the Mirabelle Tavern at the Three Village Inn in Stony Brook, has a lot to celebrate. Last fall he opened a new restaurant on Main Street in Cold Spring Harbor, Sandbar, launched Le Vin Wine Bar and Tapas at the Smith Haven Mall in Lake Grove in collaboration with Christophe Lhopitault, and just this week released an autobiographical cookbook, "A Chef's Odyssey."

I recently had the privilege of sitting down with Chef Reuge at his restaurant at The Three Village Inn as he reflected on his journey from north-central France to Long Island.

**I've read that you began your training at age 14. Did you know early in life that you wanted to be a chef?**

I developed a passion for cooking when I was about 10. I loved baking with my mother. I'd wake up early to help her make Sunday lunch. I loved to roll dough with her. That's where my early passion began. But things were different in those days. You either went to school or you found an apprenticeship, as I did. My father was a mason. We didn't have much money and for me to leave the house and go to work somewhere where I would eat, I would sleep, I would be taken care of – with clothes and so on, it was a good way out for my parents who were not very poor, but also not very rich.

**What made you decide to come to America?**

I grew up in Orléans, where there was an American army base. As a kid, I saw American soldiers every day. In 1963 I was 10 years old when the family of an American soldier moved [in] across the street. So, there was the father, the mother, two sons and a daughter. The boys were about my age. Although we did not speak the same language, kids play together. I was so impressed with them. It's the first time I saw a woman with pants – smoking a cigarette! And they would do "the barbecue" in the summer and invite me – with hot dogs and Wonder bread! Once or twice they took me to the camp, where they had a movie theater. This was my first encounter with Elvis Presley and I said, "Wow, that guy is good." I decided one day I would go and visit America.

**So when, and how, did you find your way to the United States?**

Coming out of military service, I found a job in Freebourg, Switzerland. [But] it was not a good situation for me. So after two months I was looking for another job. [In] the newspaper was an ad [from] a Swiss man, established in America, looking for a chef. I answered the ad. His name was George Rey and he owned a restaurant on 55th Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. He wanted someone quickly. I came to this country on a one-way ticket – no visa to work, only a tourist visa. I just wanted to try it. And, of course, I fell in love with New York. I got a lawyer and [began the process] of becoming legal in this country; a foreign resident with a green card, good for one year. And then, you have to renew it.

**So now you were officially a New Yorker?**

Not yet. In 1974 I returned to France with money to spend. That was new to me. I traveled to Morocco, to Spain – and spent time with friends in France. But I knew my green card was about to expire again, so I returned to America in late '74. Upon arriving in New York the second time, I met friends in a nice pub where we used to hang out. (P.J. Clarke's; it still exists.) When we arrived there was a table of giggling girls. A few of them spoke French [and my English was not so good]. We stayed to talk. One of them was to become my wife.



*Chef Guy Reuge. Photo by Lynn Spinnato*

**Tell me about her and how your lives came together.**

[Maria] had moved from Virginia [after college] and was working as a receptionist at Gourmet Magazine. Before long she was offered an editor position. [The publisher] decided to put out a book called "Gourmet France." Half the book would be about traveling in France, and half recipes from great restaurants. Sally Darr, head chef for Gourmet, went to all kinds of restaurants and got all kinds of recipes for the book. By then, people [at Gourmet] knew I was a chef and the editor-in-chief asked me to help. For one year, beside my restaurant work, I tested recipes for Gourmet. I could buy whatever I wanted, so I shopped at Jefferson Market, at Balducci's, at Zabar's – the best stores in New York at the time. My friends loved me because on the weekend I would cook and invite them for dinner. The book was published in 1977. My name is not on it, but I had a great time doing it.

**So then you married Maria?**

We had a good relationship, but I wanted to move back to France – she wanted to stay in New York. We decided to part. I landed a job as a chef in a restaurant in Luneville, in eastern France. The restaurant was called Georges de la Tour (named for a 16th-century artist from there). We opened a great restaurant in the wrong place. It was a small town, very provincial, people were not open to the prices or the type of cuisine we were doing. It was challenging. And, to tell you the truth, I missed Maria. And she missed me. The restaurant was going so-so, and my father had died of cancer, when Maria sent me a letter. Sally Darr and her husband decided to open a restaurant called La Tulipe. She asked Maria if I would come back to New York to be her chef. My green card was about to expire again. So I returned to New York.

**Tell me about that restaurant.**

La Tulipe was at 13th Street and Sixth Avenue. I went to look at it as soon as I arrived. It was a shell of a building. There was nothing there and I realized the restaurant was not [going] to open any time soon. So I found a job in one of the best restaurants in New York, Le Cygne (The Swan) as "chef saucier" [and spent my days] making 16 different sauces every day. A year later, La Tulipe opened. It was a small restaurant with about 65 seats. In France they were doing "nouvelle cuisine," and we were its precursor in [the U.S.]. We'd serve 30 to 40 customers a night. Then Times food reviewer Mimi Sheraton decided – within three visits – we were worthy of three stars which, in those days, put you on the map. We were packed every night from then on. Every big wig, every politician ate there. And celebrities: Danny Kaye, Mary Tyler Moore, Candice Bergen, Mary Travers, and the biggest thrill of all – James Beard. Those were my days at La Tulipe – very glamorous.

**After spending all those years in New York City, how did you come to open Mirabelle in St. James?**

Maria's uncle Philip Palmedo lived in Old Field. He was a businessman, a physicist by training, and very fond of French food. He said to me, "Guy, why don't you open your own restaurant?" I said I didn't have enough money. He said, "Well, if I help you raise capital, would you [put] your restaurant in my neck of the woods?" We did a lot of little dinners at his home, invited a lot of people and put together a group of 50 investors. I found a location, Maria left Gourmet and I left my chef position at Tavern on the Green. We were young and ambitious. Nothing scared us. We were sure to be a success. A food editor at Newsday became interested in Mirabelle. She and a photographer followed us for three months during construction of the restaurant. When we opened in late December, she did a big spread on us. And we were on the map; packed every day. We opened with a three-star review in the New York Times from Florence Fabricant and [the critic] at Newsday gave us four stars.

**Why did you relocate Mirabelle to the Three Village Inn?**

Projects like [Mirabelle] are nice when they are young. The first 10 years you do well. Then things change. Other restaurants open. Trends change ... I made a mistake, too. I opened a restaurant with partners in New York City in 2000. It was a fiasco. We lost a lot of money and came back to St. James. In 2007 a friend asked me, "wouldn't you like to own the Three Village Inn?" He said, "if you can make a deal with the owner, we'll go in together." I always loved this place and thought we could do something interesting. I approached the Lessing's Group but they told me it's not for sale. Three months later CEO Michael Lessing called. "So, how about you sell your restaurant, we revamp the Three Village Inn, and you come in as the chef." My life would change; I'd be corporate instead of being on my own, but we could make Mirabelle a success again. We transferred the name Mirabelle and the restaurant was reborn in 2008.

**Beside breathing new life into Mirabelle, did the link with the Lessing's bring other opportunities?**

Yes. Mr. Lessing asked me to put a restaurant in his hometown of Cold Spring Harbor. We found a place, built the building from scratch, and it's a beautiful restaurant we call Sandbar. Highly successful, it's fully booked every night, thanks to good reviews in the Times and three stars in Newsday.

**You've won many prestigious culinary awards. Which means the most to you?**

I became a Master Chef of France in 1991. I never thought I would accede to that. I admire the chefs among that group. It's an elite. Jean-Michel Bergougnoux, chef at Le Cygne, and Andre Soltner at Lutece sponsored me. And then [there is the] trophy – every year one of the Master Chefs gets it. I won the trophy in 2006 – a beautiful Toque d'Argent (silver chef's hat) that you keep in your restaurant for a year. I received it at Le Cirque. There was a big ceremony and the French ambassador was there. It was nice. In France, we love our medals.

**Do you have a favorite dish?**

Not really. For me cooking is something that is based on your mood. So you are in the mood for fish because you go to a pier and you see a fisherman coming with a fish, and you think, "Oh my God, I would love to cook this." To me, the situation sets the mood and the mood sets the food. I love everything. The beauty of working as a chef in this country is that you have so many influences: Asian, Mexican, so many others.

**Tell me about Le Vin at Smith Haven Mall.**

It's a project I put together with Christophe Lhopitault who owns Lake Side Emotions [wine shop] across the street [in the Stony Brook Village Center.] We decided to get together to open a little wine bar. The wine is sold at a very good price, by the glass or by the bottle. We have a blackboard menu, which is all tapas, but with a French flair. The menu changes every two months. It's challenging because it's in the mall and people are not used to that. There's an entrance from the food court and one from outside, [so we're not limited to the mall's hours]. Once inside you have no idea you are in a mall. It's a breath of fresh air.

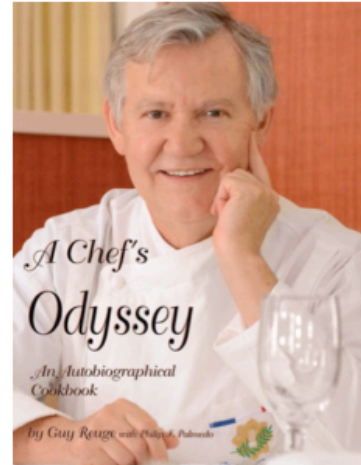
**Do you have retirement plans?**

I am getting older and people ask, "Why do you still do this?" It's been 47 years. My role model is Paul Bocuse. He just turned 90, and although he does not cook anymore, he is still active in the business. I have no desire to give up what I am doing either, as long as I am healthy. Every day I come to work excited about it. I love projects. In this business we are constantly with young people. It keeps you young.

**Book signings:**

**Three Village Inn**

Tonight, Thursday, Oct. 20, Chef Guy Reuge will host a special book signing dinner in celebration of the release of his cookbook, "A Chef's Odyssey," at the Three Village Inn, 150 Main St., Stony Brook at 7 p.m. The night will feature a four-course prix fixe menu highlighting a selection of the chef's classics. Menu items, subject to change, include panisses with harissa mayonnaise (first course); maple glazed quail and fried eggplant with lime and sherry-maple syrup (second course), aged shell steak and red wine braided beef short rib with an autumn vegetable medley or woven sole and salmon sauce Duglere (third course); and Gâteau Mirabelle and petits fours (fourth course). Cost is \$110 per person and includes a copy of the cookbook and dinner. Reservations are requested and can be made by calling 631-751-0555.



**Book Revue**

On Nov. 7, the Book Revue, 423 Park Ave., Huntington will welcome Chef Guy Reuge who will sign copies of "A Chef's Odyssey," at 7 p.m. For more information, call 631-271-1442 or visit [www.bookrevue.com](http://www.bookrevue.com).