

IGES



ATION

2010

WOMEN OF WINE

An Evening with
Metropolitan Excelsior
2012

HILLIARD BEERS

CALIFORNIA CELEBRARY ODYSSEY 2011
WINE'S AROUND THE WORLD

Radii Farewell
UNDER THE
TUSCAN
SUN
Balliance de Naples 2014

BRAD HEIGES

NEEDS ROTISSERIE



Charles Radlauer, grapevine in hand, leads Susan Vareschi and Sandi Moran at the induction. Opposite: Chaîne decorations, including commemorative pins, adorn members' ribbons. Some also earn star-shaped medallions for service (pictured).

Eat, Drink and be Knighted

By Dorothea Hunter Söme

INSIDE THE ULTIMATE FOODIE PRIVILEGE—AN EVENING WITH THE NAPLES CHAPTER OF THE CHAÎNE DES RÔTISSEURS

THE CURTAINS WERE DRAWN, THE LIGHTS dimmed. A man emerged, draped in a silver medallion and a green ribbon weighed down by more metal pins than seeds on a strawberry. I winced at any of his abrupt movements, half-expecting the thick, wide band of regal silk to split in two.

That did not happen, but the evening certainly had its share of drama: The curious figure addressed the crowd, peppering his English with French, sword at his side—a footlong dagger that appeared poached from a medieval swashbuckler (or the baddest carving knife ever to touch a Thanksgiving turkey). But wait; as the ceremony crested, he flashed another blade, this one long and slender, perfect for a duel or skewering meats churrasco-style. All 83 pairs of eyes watched the gentleman, Charles Radlauer, M.D. and J.D., knight 14 initiates into his fraternal organization. As he touched the metal to each shoulder, careful not to slice the new ribbons placed around their necks, he said, “By the power vested in me by the Conseil Magistral, *je vous consacre Chevalier de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs*.”

There were no fight songs or secret handshakes, but from the blue robes capped with scholarly berets, never-empty glasses of unoaked chardonnay and cabernet sauvignon,

Ed Kolesar, Naples' bailli (denoted by his green ribbon), checks in with Joseph and Valerie Wendt. Joseph, vice echanson, manages the chapter's wine cellar that supplied the evening's vintages.



toasts of “*Vive la Chaîne*” and emergence of a knotted Moses-like anointing staff (“a grapevine straight from Napa!”). I’d bet my only bottle of 1969 Château Lafite Rothschild that this was no ordinary night at the Naples Yacht Club.

ALFRÉD HITCHCOCK, BARRON HILTON, POPE Francis, Ronald Reagan, the Mondavi brothers and Julia Child. They share something aside from their contributions to humanity: They are or were sworn members of the *Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs*, the world’s oldest and largest gastronomic society.

Founded in 1248 as a guild for royal goose roasters (nobles, at the time, were the only people who could feast on the plump, prized waddlers), the group took an extended pause in 1793—as Radlauer reminded us that night, it was “when most of their clientele lost their taste for food, and also lost their heads.” The organization was rebooted in 1950, by a small group of Parisian friends, to be open to culinary professionals and nonprofessionals alike who wanted to bond over a shared interest in fine dining.

The Southwest Florida story, in particular, is a juicy one. We were not the first to arrive at the dinner party: Bigger cities like New York and San Francisco hosted charter baillies (“chapters,” in French) in the United States in the early ’60s. But with not one but two local baillies—Naples (founded in 1980) and Bonita Springs (created in 2000)—we have made up for it with bubbling enthusiasm. By the

latest count from the Chaîne’s U.S. headquarters, a full-time staff of three based at Fairleigh Dickinson University’s Chaîne House, Naples has swelled with steady growth over the past few years to be the second-largest of the country’s 125 baillies, with 135 members.

As with that great tradition of young co-eds pledging allegiance to Greek letters, people either seek out the Chaîne or friends bring friends into the fold. But I don’t think any of the five Frenchmen in 1950 could have imagined that within 65 years there would be 25,000 brothers and sisters (pardon me—*chevaliers* and *dames*) across 80 countries. Nor could they have guessed these pursuits would be prioritized. In our food-obsessed era, where chefs have become a breed of royalty unto themselves and Instagram accounts lionize epicurean feats, the exclusivity offered by membership to such a group is a big draw. What else could be said of those badges of honor decorating the dignified ribbons—and what sounds more fun?

MY OWN QUEST TO LIVE DELICIOUSLY IS HOW I found myself at the annual induction dinner for the Bailliage de Naples on March 26 and picking up a commemorative pin should I actually get a sash of my own. I was seeking the company of this fraternal order of foodies because it’s a group of people who, as I do, relish in knowing if the strip loin staring at them started life as a heritage breed, drinking beer and getting daily rub-downs (how

This wasn't my grandmother's Queen Elizabeth menu—nor was it the mashed potato bar I'd seen at a charity event in the same ballroom two years prior.

real-deal Kobe beef is raised in Japan).

But I was also there because I wanted proof of the theory I was testing—that joining the Chaîne here had evolved into a ticket to the best tables in Naples.

"A Chaîne dinner is not a dinner; it is an event," says Harold Small, *bailli délégué des États-Unis*, U.S. national president. Small is a distinguished lawyer in San Diego by day and the equally distinguished head of the society's rank-and-file volunteer army of hundreds by night. (In the Chaîne's service ladder, he's Radlauer's superior, and Radlauer presides over Florida's 14 non-Panhandle baillages.)

What can you expect from the five or six monthly productions in season from our two chapters? Multiple courses, wine pairings, a cocktail hour with passed hors d'oeuvres, themed décor, a room swimming with pocket squares and the Brooks Brothers Golden Fleece peeping out from under pin-bedecked ribbons—and no shortage of Chanel's interlocking C's and Ferragamo bows.

"For the induction dinner at the yacht club, I wanted to go with a classic menu from an ocean liner updated for today," says Ed Kolesar, Naples' bailli and a leading specialist in national tax for Deloitte. "I researched vintage cruise ship menus and decided to have the chef modernize shrimp cocktail, Caesar salad and filet."

We dined on a bed of cucumber "carpaccio" sliced delicately to form a crisp, perfect circle under the crustaceans alongside horseradish flan and deconstructed, gremolata-like cocktail sauce; a Parmesan "cheesecake" complementing fennel-lime anchovies and Little Gem lettuce; and a date-Madeira purée pooled under Black Angus capped with a sprinkle of microgreens. This wasn't my grandmother's *Queen Elizabeth* menu—nor was it the mashed potato bar I'd seen at a charity event in the same ballroom two years prior.

Aside from annual national dues in excess of \$225 and chapter dues that can more than double that number, attending dinners can be \$200 a head for the Naples events, slightly less for Bonita. That money is used to source wine and give the chefs a budget to buy the high-quality ingredients not often seen on regular menus.

"The chefs definitely cook up." If I got a free pass to a Chaîne dinner every time I heard that from bailliage members, my husband and I would be covered for the next several years. Many of the events are hosted at private clubs, for the exclusivity but also because the groups have become so large it's hard to find restaurants that fit them—except for summer DineArounds, the casual monthly meet-ups hosted at places



Chefs work to impress the group, and this night was no exception, starting with a reimagined shrimp cocktail. Wines, like a Philip Togni cabernet, are sourced from renowned vintners.



Radlauer uses this Champagne saber, a gift from his wife, for an apropos touch when anointing new members. He has initiates hold a second sword with the Chaîne crest soldered to the blade.



"With the wine festival, there is a year to plan. As bailli, you start over every month."

—SANDI MORAN

like The Bay House, Angelina's and the new Inca's Kitchen when half of the chapter is no longer here.

One restaurant that can host a seasonal event—and puts a premium on it—is Sea Salt.

"We absolutely go above and beyond because of the clientele," says Ingrid Aielli, co-owner of Sea Salt and a member of the Chaîne since she and her husband, Fabrizio, lived and owned three restaurants in Washington, D.C. "It's definitely a challenge for the restaurant because many days of preparation go into it. But it's prestigious. You want to showcase the talents of your kitchen, the service and the overall experience."

The bailli will work with the venue to bring in décor, set the menu, come up with a seating chart and arrange any entertainment. While the creative juices flow freely, there is also considerable weight on his or her shoulders to make everything memorable. "It's a tough job. It's a labor of love. Let's put it that way," says Sandi Moran, Naples' bailli for two terms from 2008 to 2014, current regional Chaîne officer, and co-chair of the 2015 and 2016 Naples Winter Wine Festivals. "With the wine festival, there is a year to plan. As bailli, you start over every month."

When asked, Kolesar, who just finished his first year in the role, smiles surreptitiously and scans the room as though someone may be eavesdropping. He confesses that it's like a part-time job. Pointing to Ian Reece (his second in command), he lets out a laugh and says, "I get more emails from him than my partner, work or my family."

Since Chaîne chapters tend to take on different personalities and there's no limit as to how many you can join



Menus with wine pairings often highlight a theme: A sophisticated spin on filet was served with a warmed terrine of root vegetables; Pahlmeyer unsoaked chardonnay was poured with an earlier course.



if you find members to vouch for you, six local couples have one spouse as a member of each.

Naples keeps a wine cellar, for example, while Bonita does not. It's a costly yet ultimately cost-saving initiative, buying at auction and other opportune times ("Why not pay half-price for Champagne in June?" Reece observes), and storing 1,000 bottles at Fairways Wine Vault. "Sandi built up the expectations," Kolesar says. "But there's a need. People want that in Naples." It's also why the chapter charges what it does.

But really the difference between the local baillies comes down to the camaraderie. It's first and foremost a dining club. You are there with friends. Nearly everyone who has joined in Naples or Bonita has signed on because someone invited them to an event—and they felt right at home. Another reason it works so well here, where the No. 1 cocktail party question is "When did you move to Florida?", is that it's a great way to make friends. And make them fast.

FOR RETIREES IN PARTICULAR, THERE'S a path and a purpose in service to the Chaîne. Attend a special dinner, pick up a pin. Run for office, pick up a new title and a different-colored ribbon—or, for exemplary contributions, be honored with a medallion (the "star of excellence") to also drape around your neck (Naples alone has 13 medallion holders). Loyalty also is saluted at the annual induction dinners. This year in Naples, two gentlemen received recognition for 30 years of membership: David Wilson and Clarke Swanson of Swanson Vineyards ("a pioneer of the Napa tasting room, the idea you can sit down with a glass of wine and cheese," Moran told our table after the modest Swanson had stood up). And even non-retirees find themselves embracing the



Radlauer stands by the Chaîne emblem as Jim Lungo pledges to be a chevalier to the brotherhood, while Kolesar and officer Thelma Negley ready ribbons for other new knights and ladies.

Chaîne, including two Naples inductees in their 20s this year (Susan Vareschi, the bailli of Bonita Springs, says she's interested in cultivating a younger audience as well).

Taryn Cafiero-McBride, a real estate agent in Naples, had been a commercial food photographer when she left New York City in 2003 and found herself searching for something to fill that void. She went as far as hosting quarterly themed dinners under the name Soiree until she stumbled on the Chaîne about five years ago, as well as the Culinary and Hospitality Education Foundation of Southwest Florida (CHEF), a nonprofit that grew out of a Chaîne fundraiser.

"I would say the restaurants and clubs definitely roll out the red carpet for us," Cafiero-McBride says. "I think they have a lot of respect for the organization, and they're creating a special evening for us. Not all of the events are spectacular, I'm sorry to say, but you're always getting an interesting food and wine pairing, and you're sharing it with like-minded people."

A parallel I've found between the Chaîne experience and that of Psi Upsilon or, in my case, Alpha Omicron Pi, is the instant bond among members. This brotherhood connects fine-dining aficionados across ages, professions and nationalities. (They share a tendency as well to get carried away with accoutrements, like insignia cumberbunds, luggage tags—even business cards. "I paid extra for the raised golden seal," Radlauer says. "It adds a nice touch.")

In an age where flying to Bangkok is almost as easy as flying to Mexico City or Chicago, it's also a way to get an authentic taste of epicurean traditions throughout the world. Each country and region plans assemblages and grand *chaptres*, annual meetings and trips that are open to all members.

"People can afford to dine where they want to, but I can tell you the most exceptional dining experiences we've had have been Chaîne events," says Small, who lists a six-course dinner with a chamber orchestra in St. Petersburg, Russia, near the top of his list. He also recalls a visit to a restaurant in Tallinn, Estonia, with particular fondness. He picked it because the chef was a member of the Chaîne, and, after seeing Small's business card bearing the Chaîne crest, he sent over Champagne, a crayfish course and dessert gratis.

"He did not speak English, I didn't speak Estonian, but the language of friendship, food and camaraderie spoke loudly amongst all of us," Small says.

Anyone with enough patience, or the right connections, can get a reservation at Noma or El Cellar de Can Roca, or, closer to home, Sea Salt, Bleu Provence or the Port Royal Club.

But who can say they're touring a vineyard with brothers in Australia or trying a new restaurant in Naples with 90 kindred spirits? "The best way to think about the Chaîne is when you entertain your friends at home—the same is true for a Chaîne event because it's family," Small says. ♣