Experts debate American cuisine

Purists, innovators hash out differences during 4-day Symposium in New Orleans

By Donald Frazier

NEW ORLEANS—A long-simmering debate between purists and innovators broke into the open at the second annual Symposium on American Cuisine here last month.

Should the new American cuisine be strictly American, spurning influences from Europe and Asia to concentrate on the traditional dishes of the country's regions? Or should it be more eclectic, integrating the native and foreign aspects of our culture and our cuisine?

The assorted chefs, food writers, restaurateurs and educators found no definite answer to this or many of the other questions raised during the four-day session. But they did learn that there are as many different interpretations of the new American cuisine as there are practitioners of the style.

The first salvo was fired for the purists by James Villas, food and wine editor of *Town and Country* magazine.

"Are those involved in the exploration of our cookery being really receptive to our gastronomic heritage?" he asked. "Or are they merely evolving a frivolous eclecticism which draws too heavily on foreign concepts and shoves our many regional styles of cooking farther and farther into the background?"

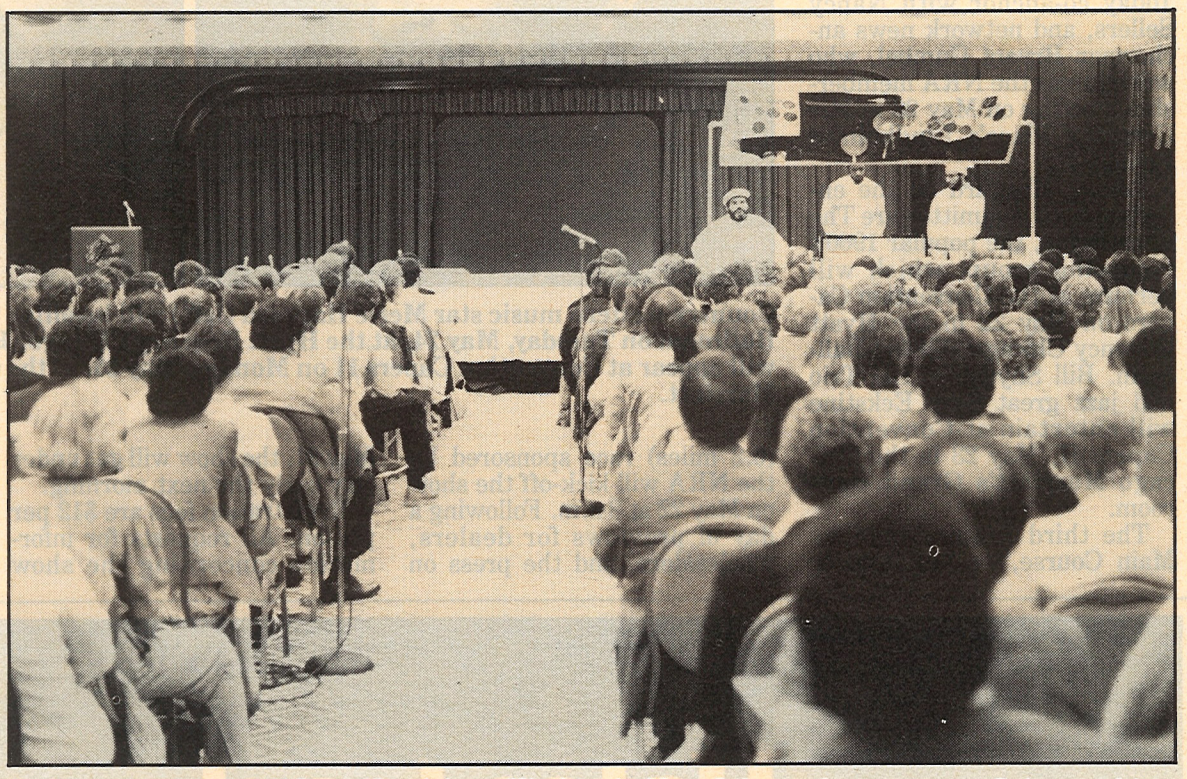
He encouraged the chefs of the new American school to shun foreign influences and, instead, to rediscover and learn to use the unique ingredients and traditional cooking methods of the country's regions.

But Christian Millau, author of the influential Gault Millau guidebooks and an advocate of innovative approaches to American cuisine, disagreed.

"It's a good thing to reflect on your roots," he said. "But when it comes to eating them, I'm glad we have always had enough good cooks to add good sauces and good ideas to them."

American chefs, he said, should develop an American culinary tradition by using their skill and imagination to integrate regional American cuisine with the various influences from all over the globe which converge in the United States.

"We can't expect anything of protectionism and isolation," he warned. "A phenomenon of provincialism is developing which could, in the end, be very frustrating—and dangerous."



Paul Prudhomme of K-Pauls Louisiana Kitchen in New Orleans demonstrates Cajun cooking during the second annual Symposium on American Cuisine held last month in New Orleans.

More than 300 attendees gathered for the symposium, sponsored by the Food Service Associates of Louisville, Ky. Last year's event, held in Louisville, provided some of the first significant national recognition to the then-infant interest in American styles of cuisine.

But this year's symposium went farther than simply publicizing the movement.

"This year, people have a lot of questions on their mind," said William Primavera, who helped coordinate the event. "The last year has seen an astounding amount of activity in the new American cuisine, activity going in all directions as chefs try to define and expand the field."

The symposium comprised several days of speeches, seminars, panel discussions and demonstrations.

Many of the prominent chefs in the field, such as Paul Prudhomme of K-Pauls Louisiana Kitchen in New Orleans and Richard Perry of the Richard Perry restaurant in St. Louis demonstrated the techniques they use in their own regional styles.

Many of the sessions addressed operational concerns which have come up as restaurateurs try to implement the ideas created by their chefs.

Mike Marocco of the Rhode Island Inn in Providence, R.I., for example, described how his restaurant gradually introduced a new-style American menu without alienating his long-time customers (see related story).

Others, such as Stuart Levin of New York's Top of the Park and Ella Brennan of Commander's Palace in New Orleans, discussed how their own styles of cooking have evolved to reflect current trends in American cuisine.

But much of the exchange of ideas and viewpoints occurred in the many purely social events of the symposium.

The night after the first full day of the conference was marked by a dinner at Commander's Palace commemorating the 100th anniversary of that restaurant, which won a Fine Dining Hall of Fame Award from *Nation's Restaurant News* last year.

The next night, the conferees and their guests boarded the side-wheeler *Natchez* for a three-hour cruise on the Mississippi River after parading from the Fairmont Hotel down Canal Street, the city's major downtown thoroughfare, to the waterfront.

The topic of conversation throughout the symposium focused on the clash between Villas' advice to develop the new American cooking look to the country's native ingredients and regional traditions, and Millau's praise of eclecticism.

But the participants agreed on two points raised from the podium.

First, they applauded Villas when he repudiated the hypocrisy of restaurateurs who, he said, pretend to offer American cuisine but actually serve food prepared with imported ingredients in a manner clearly inspired by another national cooking style.

"In restaurants and homes where they pretend to wave the American flag, I'm confronted with every culinary conceit from precious little crepes of caviar and creme fraiche tied up with chives to vinegared raw scallops and cucumbers served in a lacquer box to frog legs in an insipidly sweet sauce.

"Sometimes," he added, "when at these new American cuisine restaurants, I have to wonder if I'm really in America."

He inveighed against many magazines and cookbook editors, claiming that their recipes for new-style American dishes often require foreign ingredients such as confit, prosciutto, truffles and calamata olives, while forsaking American items such as wild mushrooms, buffalo, fiddlehead ferns and bourbon.

"Yes, I understand that the industry is in its infancy and that it will take many years before we can produce quality ingredients in scale, he said. "But even at this stage in our development, there's no more excuse for chefs not working exclusively with the great bounty of native ingredients we already have at hand."

Second, they insisted on rapid improvements in the availability and the quality of the fresh seasonal products which, for them, are essential to the new style of cooking. Many complained that the supplies of these high-quality native-American ingredients have not kept pace with demand.

Mike Foley of Printers' Row restaurant in Chicago called for

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The 100th anniversary of a New Orleans tradition

Christian Millau (raising glass), author of the Gault Millau guidebooks, toasts the 100th anniversary of Commander's Palace. Hostess Ella Brennan (second from left) had a special Haute Creole meal prepared for the occasion.

NEW ORLEANS—A 100th anniversary dinner for Commander's Palace became one of the high points of the Symposium on American Cuisine for many of its attendees for two reasons.

First, it demonstrated how a regional American cooking style—in this case, Creole—can be updated to suit modern tastes while retaining its heritage in a particular culture.

And second, it celebrated Commander's Palace for becoming one of the most famous restaurants in New Orleans and the country since it was taken over by the Brennan family in 1969.

Under the direction of executive chef Gerhard Brill, the Commander's kitchen staff served a complex meal to 250 diners simultaneously.

Ella Brennan, one of the restaurant's proprietors with her siblings, Dick, Adelaide, Dottie and John, noted that the meal's style—Haute Creole, she called it—is especially appropriate for a symposium largely concerned with the interplay of regional traditions with innovation in the new American cuisine.

The first course, for example, offered a traditional Creole dish—oysters—in an unconventional setting. In New Orleans, oysters usually come in a heavy sauce. But for Oysters Trufant, the oysters were lightly poached in reduced cream and their own liquor, then topped with Oregon caviar.

The main course, grilled Louisiana pigeon, was also prepared in a manner reflecting the old and the new in Creole cooking.

Two other dishes on the menu also benefited from a good year for Louisianan produce.

Lake Salvador soft shell crabs, dressed with shrimp from the nearby Gulf of Mexico and lightly fried in batter, were among the first of an early season. And the crawfish bisque, according to the New Orleanians present, was memorable because this year's crawfish season is about two months longer than usual, improving the quality of the harvest.

Experts take sides on American cuisine

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an alliance between suppliers and restaurants to encourage the production and smooth the flow of the special products which, according to almost everyone at the symposium, are essential to the new American style.

"We've got to learn how to bypass the middleman, the broker," he said. "There's no way we can provide enough volume to satisfy him. He's going to concentrate on the large commercial accounts. We've got to go it alone."

But he, and many of the other restaurateurs and chefs present, wondered if the market for the ingredients they need could ever become large enough to warrant special attention by farmers, growers and breeders.

"Face it," one chef said, "these are tough times for agriculture. Before we, as a group, can convince growers to raise the things we need to our specifications, three things have got to happen: first, we have to be willing to pay the price. Agriculture here, unlike in Europe, is capital intensive. But the products we want need a lot of skilled labor.

"Second, we're going to need more research and development so we can raise the things on a commercial basis instead of searching for them in the wild. Take venison. Or grouse. Or even fiddlehead ferns. And third, we're going to have to show the suppliers that we have financial staying power. They aren't going to change what they do for us as long as they suspect that all of this might be a flash in the pan."

The debate between the purists and the innovators was muddied by participants such as Ella Brennan and Richard Perry. Brennan, one of the proprietors of Commander's Palace, pointed out that the food there is both innovative and traditional American regional.

"Just because ours is a traditional Creole restaurant, that doesn't mean that we can't do some things differently to update the style a bit," the restaurateur said.

Many of the dishes served by Commander's Palace, she explained, are Creole-inspired recipes which have been altered to impart a lighter, less calorious feel. Roux, the flour-based sauce that is a staple of New Orleans traditional cooking, is nearly absent at Commander's Palace, for example.

Richard Perry, of the restaurant which bears his name in south St. Louis, said that the traditional Midwestern family-style cookery he practices can still accommodate some outside influences.

"I don't see why I can't serve croissants and still be a good Midwestern restaurant," he said. He also gave credit to Paul Bocuse, commonly known as one of the fathers of nouvelle cuisine, for teaching American chefs how to top soups with puff pastry.

A few participants wondered whether it is possible to define the new American cuisine. The size and diversity of this country, its collection of ethnic groups, its relative youth and the influence of other cultures, they said, complicate any attempt to decide what is really American.

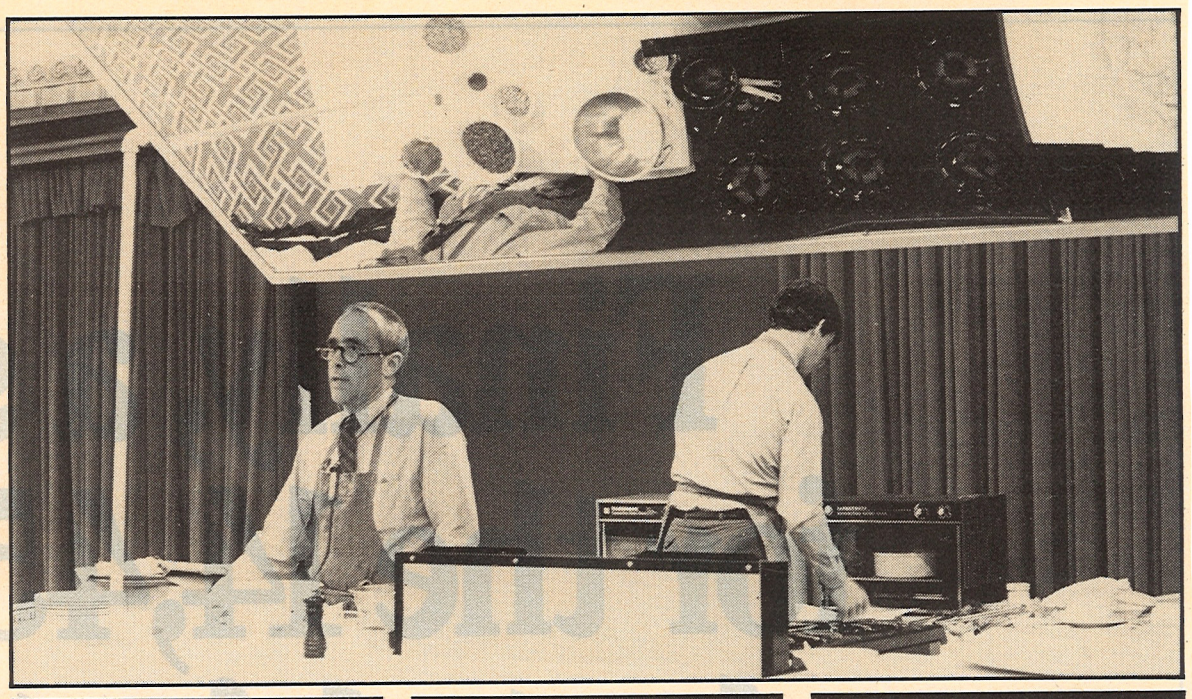
"There is no new American cuisine. It's improvisation and experimentation. But we've always done that," according to Richard Nelson, a Portland, Ore., cooking teacher. He pointed out that one of the most distinctive culinary styles in the world, New Orleanian cooking, originated when homesick French settlers tried to recreate the dishes they knew at home.

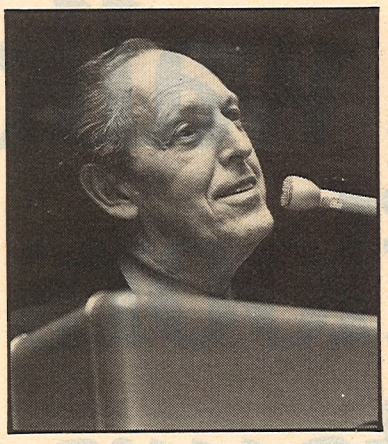
Another participant, Mark Miller of the Fourth Street Grill in Berkeley, Calif., holds a generous definition of American cuisine. "I was trained in America and I have American tastes," he said, insisting that his style remains American even while using many of the seasonings and techniques he discovers abroad.

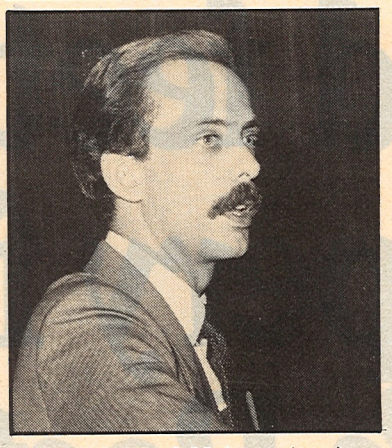
One food writer advised the chefs and restaurateurs to adopt freely from all elements of their training and experiences because "a truly regional American cuisine cannot be developed from the top down. That has to happen from the grass roots. Sure, we can recognize it and nurture some of its elements. But we cannot create it just because we decide that it ought to exist."

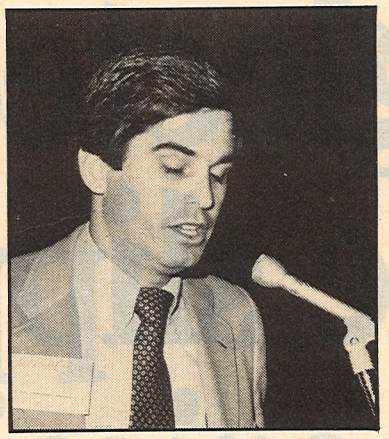
Unlike last year's event, the symposium attracted many representatives from large food-service companies. They said they attended because the new American cuisine could emerge as a culinary trend in the mainstream of the industry in a few years.

"That is the significance of the symposium," Primavera said. "It has created the need, and the occasion for people from all over the food-service industry to get together to take pride in our culinary heritage—to develop, define and celebrate it."









Speakers at the conference included Richard Nelson (top), a cooking instructor from Portland, Ore.; (l. to r.) Stuart Levin, Top of the Park; Carl Braggemeier, Brennan's of Houston; Ralph Brennan, Mr. B's, and Jerry Berns, "21" Club.

Introducing American cuisine carefully

NEW ORLEANS—Restaurateurs can successfully introduce innovative new American cookery to a clientele used to another style—*if* they do it carefully.

That was the message of Michael Marocco, manager of the Plantations Room restaurant of the Rhode Island Inn of Providence, R.I., to the Symposium on American Cuisine.

"We felt our loyal customers, who were accustomed to our Continental menu, might be reluctant to try American cuisine in its new context," he said. "We knew that our approach had to be carefully considered and implemented."

Marocco, credited with coining the term "creative American cuisine," defines the movement as "the use of the freshest indigenous American products prepared in original dishes, resulting in a new American taste focusing on creative flavor, presentation and lighter taste."

Despite its stature as one of the state's more popular continental restaurants, Marocco was determined to introduce some new style dishes. The Plantations Room of the Rhode Island Inn is a training restaurant for the culinary program at the nearby John & Wales College; Marocco and other faculty members felt its students needed practical experience in the new style before graduating.

"A culinary school should be guiding the learning experience of future culinarians," he explained. "It should be an exponent of new trends in the industry."

Several weeks of tasting and testing produced a menu which, Marocco said, adhered to his definition of creative American cuisine while remaining accessible to the middle-of-the-road customers who patronize the Plantations Room.

To avoid supplanting the regular menu, the managers of the restaurant introduced the new items on table tents. Each of the rotating series of table tents listed a soup, two appetizers and several entrees.

The experiment, Marocco reported to the symposium attendees, was successful.

"Within a week, as much as 40% of the entree selection was from the American menu. I feel that we have developed a new and healthy respect for American products and services."