LOCAL LANDMARK

Félicitations à Chez François

PART 1: HUMBLE BEGINNINGS OF A COUNTRY INN | BY KAREN WASHBURN

Above, left: François and son Jacques in front of Aux Trois Mousquetaires where François was a chef c. 1953; and Chez François in the Claridge Hotel, 818 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D.C.

Opposite, left: François in the dining room of the original Chez François in 1964; and Chez François sidewalk cafe on 818 Connecticut Avenue

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary for L'Auberge Chez François, which also has the distinction of being the oldest restaurant in Great Falls. This landmark establishment has long been a destination for many diners throughout the Washington metropolitan area since it moved to Great Falls from Washington, D.C., in 1976. Many patrons view it as absolutely the best place to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, graduations or any other important life events. Its longevity is no small accomplishment in an era when restaurants open with great fanfare, enjoy fleeting popularity and then close within a few years.

The half-timbered, whitewashed building trimmed with red accents, stained glass windows and bright flowers, is the quintessential French country inn. The unpretentious front porch, furnished with vintage benches and a red carpet, establishes the mood for the quiet ambience inside. Through the arched front door, the visitor is greeted in a lobby filled with antiques, an aquarium with tropical fish and a large raised fireplace. The half-timbered style is repeated in all four dining rooms, which are furnished and accessorized with a large and unique collection of heirloom dishes, copper and art. A very professional wait staff, uniformly attired in red vests, provides excellent service. The quality of the meals presented certainly exceeds the modern definition of comfort food, but the entire atmosphere, combined with the viands available, translates to an experience of comfort and celebration extraordinaire.

This gem of a country inn is the vibrant legacy of its founder Chef François Haeringer, who passed away in 2010 at the age of 91. Chez François is the culmination of his lifelong dream to own a family-operated country inn to serve Alsatian French-style food without pretension and at affordable prices. His standards were exacting. He had spent a lifetime learning the business from the kitchen floor up and believed there was only one way to achieve excellence. In a 1987 *Washington Post* interview, François claimed, "To be a chef, you have to learn. You have to learn to wash dishes first, to peel potatoes first, to clean the stove first, to clean the pots first."

François was born in 1919 in the Alsatian town of Obernai, France. Alsace was a region well-known for wine, beer and food production, and good cooking was regarded as a necessary art. The region had just been

returned to France from Germany at the close of World War I. Numerous members of François's family were involved in food production. They had a butcher shop, a charcuterie and a patisserie. François's Uncle Jacques was a chef who trained with the renowned Chef Auguste Escoffier, and his older brother Alfred was also a chef. His mother, a homemaker, spent many hours every day in the kitchen preparing meals for her family. Given his heritage, it is not surprising that he developed his love of cooking almost from birth.

Formal training for François began when he was apprenticed at age 16 in the kitchen at L'Hotel Chambard in Kaysersberg. That experience impressed on him that to be a good chef, one must learn how to do anything and everything related to food preparation. It was brutally hard work that started about five a.m. He cleaned the stove, a task that required him to scrape out the coal ashes. Then he hauled in more coal and started a new fire. Next he was charged with taking the ashes to the wine cellar and sprinkling them over the bottles so it would appear that the wine had been around long enough for the bottles to get dusty. Before his day was over, he would scrub pots, wash dishes, mop the floor, peel potatoes and clean vegetables. After three years of hard training, he was ready for a new job in the kitchen of famed Chef Lucien Diat in the Plaza Athénée in Paris.

When World War II started, François joined the French army and cooked for the officers. After the Germans captured France, he was taken prisoner, and his cooking skill may have saved his life. Instead of being forced to fight for the Germans on the Eastern front, as most Alsatians were, he was sent to the Four Seasons Hotel in Munich to work with the well-known German chef Alfred Walterspiel. Guarded by the Gestapo, François had to cook for all of the high-ranking Nazis, including Hitler. It was an exacting task and carried a bit more risk than normal restaurant cooking.

When the war was over, François turned to seasonal work. During the summer months, he cooked at resorts on the French coast and then moved to the mountains during ski season. France had been decimated by the fighting during the war, and food was still in short supply, which made it difficult to offer a menu with variety.

François met his future wife, Marie Antoinette, who passed away this June, when he was chef at a hotel in the Pyrenees and she was working at the front desk and doing bookkeeping. They married in 1948. Tired of the deprivations caused by the war and lured by glowing reports of a land of plenty from François's Uncle Jacques and brother Alfred, the couple decided to immigrate to America. Both Jacques and Alfred were already successful restaurateurs in the nation's capital. The Haeringers settled in the District of Columbia, and François went to work for Alfred at Haeringer's Buffeteria, a restaurant that was actually a cafeteria boasting the novel addition of a salad bar. And while it needed cooks to operate, there was no opportunity for a French chef to show off his style. So Haeringer moved on to work for his Uncle Jacques, who was head chef at the Chevy Chase Club.

Communication was a significant problem at the club–most of the kitchen staff was Italian. François, bilingual in Alsatian and French, did not speak English or Italian. And even though he was young, he had definite ideas about how to run a kitchen. So did his uncle. As son Jacques later said, "They didn't get along. What a surprise! Two hard-headed Alsatians, and they didn't get along."

After a brief time in Ketchikan, Alaska, where François cooked at a local hotel, the Haeringers returned to the District of Columbia, and François became the chef at the Three Musketeers (Aux Trois Mousquetaires), a medium-priced French restaurant in the Claridge Hotel on Connecticut Avenue. When the owner decided to retire, François bought the Three Musketeers, reopening it in 1954 as Chez François.

François immediately set out to make his dream a reality–providing good Alsatian French meals at an affordable price in a comfortable but unpretentious atmosphere–a fairly ambitious project for the city at that time.

In spite of the huge population growth brought about by World War II, Washington, D.C. was still very much a small southern city. There were numerous restaurants, steak houses, sandwich shops, cafeterias and drugstore lunch counters, but fine dining was almost a foreign concept.

Most of the hotels had restaurants, and so did the bus stations and airport. Travelers had to be able to eat. The lunch trade was stronger than the dinner market because many area residents viewed going to a restaurant for dinner as something to be reserved for a special occasion. There were numerous plain and simple establish-

ments of fewer than ten tables that served sandwiches or a heavier meal of meat or fried chicken, potatoes, a vegetable and limited pies or cakes for dessert. The average price of a meal was 60 cents. Dinners in better establishments cost about 75 cents for a chicken dinner, while filet mignon was $2.50, sirloin was $2.75, and chopped tenderloin was $1.

The prevailing attitude of middle-class diners regarding French restaurants was fairly negative. They believed that the title implied aloof and intimidating waiters presenting a menu in a language that they couldn't read or understand in a hushed and sterile atmosphere. And to top it off, this torture would all cost more than they could afford. François set out to break this concept with the opening of his own restaurant.

Planned in a style of a brasserie, the new restaurant was furnished like a French country inn with simple wooden chairs and tables covered in checked tablecloths. The walls were decorated with prints and paintings of François's home town of Obernai, vintage copper pots and pans and other antiques. The effect was comfortable and homey. The staff was not in the least intimidating, as Chez François was an equal opportunity employer long before it was a requirement. Most of the wait staff were women–Americans and natives of other countries–dressed in skirts, white blouses and full aprons in bright prints. The kitchen staff was also diverse.

Atmosphere and service taken care of, the last major challenge for the chef was the menu. For generations, Americans had been meat, gravy and potato diners. Vegetables were usually overcooked until they became pasty and soggy. Salads consisted of lettuce, tomatoes and cucumbers or some type of Jell-O mold for special occasions. None of it was particularly imaginative, and while green vegetables might make it to the plate, they were often carried back into the kitchen when the meal was over.

François was determined to introduce his customers to the foods of Alsace. Due to its location, the restaurant had the potential to attract international patrons, but what about the Americans? It helped that so many Washingtonians had served overseas during World War II and might be more adventurous in trying new dishes. Beverages presented another conundrum. Most might enjoy a pre-dinner cocktail or two, but it was a standing joke that with dinner the girls would drink coffee and the boys would drink Coca Cola. Among other things, the chef would have to introduce them to wine. Wine was not popular at the time and was only available in limited varieties. What's more, good wine could be hard to locate.

Wine wasn't the only challenge for the restaurant–many spices and garnishes were not readily available from local suppliers. In the beginning, François went to the 5th Street Market every morning to see what meats and vegetables were on hand so he could plan his menu. But to create the classic dishes he wanted to cook, he had to send far away for some of the ingredients. Shallots could only be found in a dried form. Sole and frog legs had to be purchased frozen.

Supply problems notwithstanding, the restaurant opened with a full menu of Alsatian French dishes. A four-course meal was offered at prices ranging between $3 and $4.50. The appetizers included pâté, salmon fumé, onion soup or vichyssoise. Snails, oysters and shrimp cocktails were all extra. Main course offerings were scallops, filet of sole, lobster, veal scaloppini, coq au vin, ham, Rock Cornish hen, duckling, lamb chops and a selection of beef steaks. For the more adventurous diner, there were frog legs, calf's brain, smoked beef tongue, veal kidneys, calf's liver and sweetbreads.

All of these dishes were garnished and sauced with François's special recipes and accompanied by fresh vegetables prepared in his own style, blanched and lightly sautéed, not cooked to a mush. A salad course, with his special signature vinaigrette, and lovely fresh bread and butter were included in the price. The dessert menu was equally impressive with cakes, tarts, fruit in wine, chocolate mousse or meringues. Patrons could also order a cheese plate to finish off a meal for only 50 cents more.

Open for lunch and dinner, the restaurant was a success. Customers loved the food and the atmosphere, and all 85 seats were usually occupied with a line of people waiting to be seated. Through the years, as more space in the hotel became available, Chez François expanded and ultimately could seat 250. Even then there were lines of hungry customers that were willing to wait for a table.

Times had changed and a new generation viewed dining in restaurants as a normal weekly occurrence. The advent of the credit card also was a boost to business. By 1970, over fifty percent of the customers paid with credit cards. In an interview, François said, "People don't want to carry cash. To lay out $25 in cash is much less

Above: Jacques, Marie Antoinette and François Haeringer, Chez François, Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D. C.

Opposite, left: standing, left to right: Paul Haeringer, office manager Frieda Bene, Robert Haeringer and Jacques Haeringer; seated: François Haeringer and Marie-Antoinette Haeringer; and Lassie dining at Chez François, Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D. C. in 1969

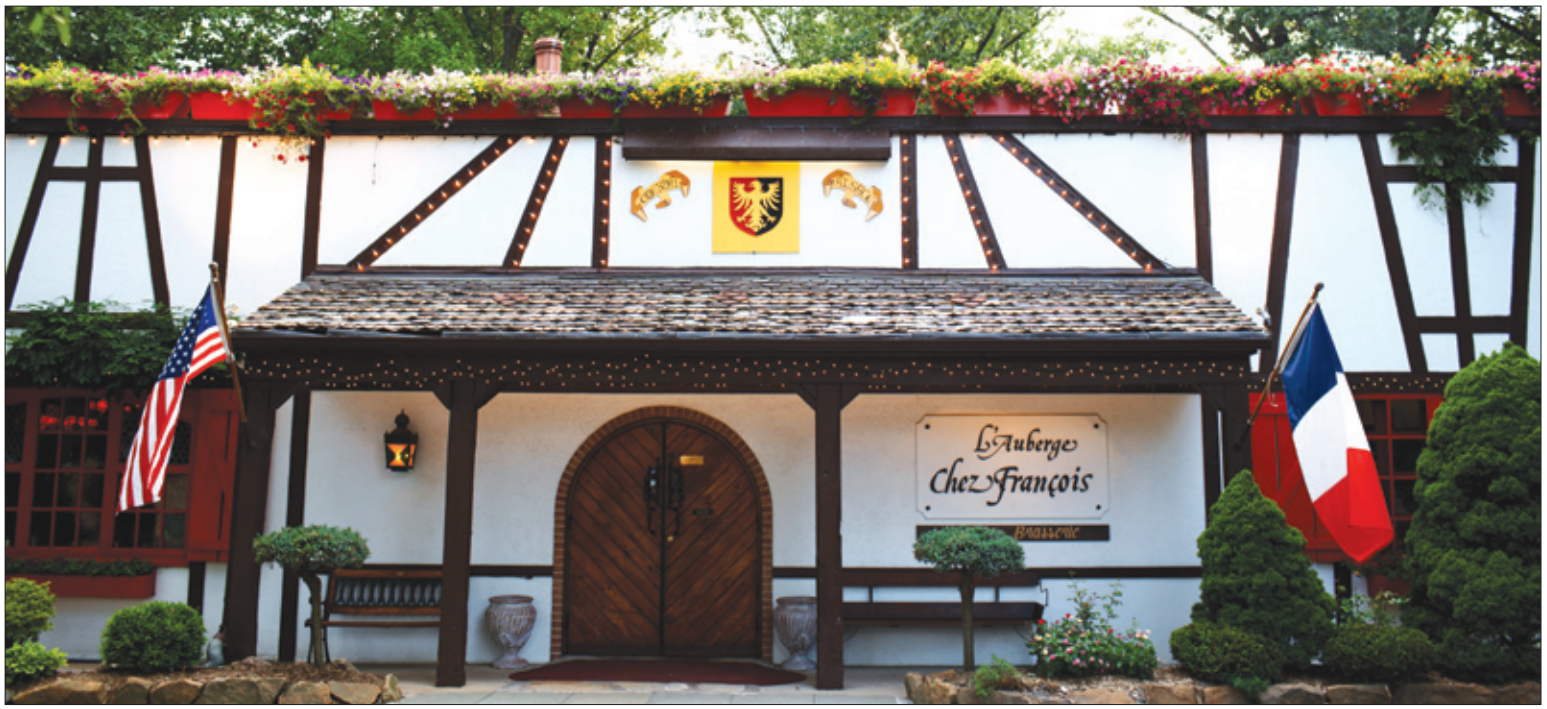
conducive to spending than signing for it and worrying later."

François opened a sidewalk cafe in 1962. He was the second restaurateur in the city to offer outdoor dining, and the venture was an instant hit. People loved to sit outside with a glass of wine or a drink, even if they planned to dine inside later, and watch the world go by. As the reputation of the restaurant grew, the customer base of locals and tourists also included politicians, senators, congressmen, newscasters and movie and sports stars.

The most unusual guest of all was a canine movie star in 1969. The collie then cast in the role of Lassie was in town with his trainer Rudd Weatherwax who invited Elinor Lee and Lawrence Laurent of *The Washington Post* to join them for lunch on Chez Francois's outdoor terrace. In this case, François waived his policy of requiring his staff to allow the famous to dine anonymously. They all gathered to watch Lassie exhibit the best of table manners. He was seated on a chair with a stool under the table to support his front feet. Garbed in a lobster bib to protect his beautiful flowing fur, he delicately ate beef bourguignon spoon-fed to him by Elinor Lee.

As successful as the restaurant was, it still didn't fulfill François's dream of a country inn. And not one to give up on his ideas, when outside forces dictated a move, he seized the chance to make his dream a reality.

Next time: Chez François moves to the country.



LOCAL LANDMARK

Félicitations à Chez François

PART 2: CONTINUING A PATRIARCH'S DREAM | BY KAREN WASHBURN

At top: Chez François today; above: Jacques and François Haeringer
Photographs courtesy the Haeringer Family

Opposite page: River Bend Country Store
Photograph courtesy Great Falls Historical Society

Page 26: Jacques in the vegetable garden at Chez François; and page 27: The Garden Room
Photographs courtesy the Haeringer Family

In 2014, Great Falls landmark restaurant L'Auberge Chez François celebrated its 60th year in business and its 38th year in its present location. When Chef François Haeringer and his wife Marie Antoinette opened their first restaurant in 1954, it was an opportunity for him to satisfy a lifelong dream. After years of professional training with some of the premier chefs in France, and more years of cooking in restaurants owned by others, François was ready to set out on his own. His goal was to serve well-prepared food, at affordable prices, in a comfortable atmosphere in a family-owned-and-operated restaurant. To that end, he founded Chez François in the Claridge Hotel on Connecticut Avenue. After decorating it in the style of a French country inn, he set about introducing Washingtonians to fine dining without the high prices and intimidating atmospheres often associated with French restaurants.

There were other French restaurants in the city but none that treated food or customers in the same manner as Chez François. The menu offered dishes cooked, sauced and garnished in the style of François' native region of Alsace. The dining room was unpretentious and comfortable. The wait staff was professional and friendly and not in the least intimidating. From its beginning the restaurant was popular for both lunch and dinner. Through the years, François took over more space in the hotel and eventually opened a sidewalk terrace for outdoor dining. Two hundred and fifty people could be seated at once. Even with the added space, there were still lines of hungry diners waiting to be seated. The restaurant had a wonderful location and a large following of loyal customers that included politicians, senators, congressmen, newscasters and movie and sports stars.

After two decades of growth and success, Chez François was slated for a major change. In 1973 the Claridge was sold for demolition. The new owners of the site planned to build a large steel-and-glass office building and lease space for the restaurant but at a price that François claimed was "ridiculous." After inquiring about other locations with the same high-priced rents, he decided it was time to move to the country.

François set his sights on Great Falls, Virginia. He already owned land there, which he had purchased in the 1960s, but it was not zoned for a restaurant. And

the Great Falls Citizens Association was not likely to be amenable to a zoning change. Therefore, he would have to find an available property that was correctly zoned–no easy task since properties zoned for commercial establishments in Great Falls were few and far between. François' accountant and his lawyer strongly advised against the move to what they considered a remote location. Their fears for his success were well-founded.

Because Great Falls was considered quite far from Washington, land was still cheap. Five-acre homesites were selling for $20,000 to $25,000. However, it was difficult for city dwellers to get there. Access from the Beltway was via Georgetown Pike, a narrow, winding country road that traversed steep hills and low creek bottoms. Drivers found that the route straightened and leveled out past the entrance to Great Falls Park, but first-time travelers to the region often felt like they were in the middle of nowhere.

The area was marked by acres of empty farmland. Most of the large farming operations had closed except for those growing corn and hay. Others had converted to riding stables. Suburban development had only touched a few locations. The village of Great Falls at the intersection of Georgetown Pike and Walker Road consisted of an auto repair shop, a post office and bank located in the old schoolhouse, the Grange, Buck's Country Store, three gas stations, a 7-11, a firehouse, a sheet metal shop, a deserted barn and a few old farmhouses. There were no shopping centers, no stoplights, no street lights, no sidewalks and few street signs. Rush hour on Georgetown Pike was at the time appropriately named. A steady stream of cars zipped along the road at average speeds of 45 to 50 miles an hour.

While the countryside was open and beautiful, it seemed an unlikely site for an upscale French restaurant. But it was just what François wanted. In its new location, Chez François would be a country inn. Of course he would not get much drop-in trade–the restaurant would have to become a destination for his loyal customers.

Finally, François found what he thought was the perfect place, River Bend Country Store, at the intersection of Beech Mill and Springvale roads, about three miles from the village center. The first time he went to the site, even François had to wonder if people would really want to drive up three miles on Springvale Road, a hilly country lane, to eat dinner. The alternate route, Walker Road to Beech Mill Road, was even worse with hairpin bends added to the hilly road. However, when he saw the six-acre site, he knew it was perfect for his country inn.

"There is only one way to do it here–my way."

–François Haeringer

Few besides François would have seen the potential in the site. Formerly an auto repair shop and now housing an antique store, a gun shop and a small delicatessen, the main building was a very unprepossessing flat-roofed cinder block rectangle completely without charm. The property also included a small hipped-roof auxiliary building that had once been a barbershop. In front of both buildings was a large expanse of gravel parking lot and a hitching rail for horses. Undeterred, François saw the property's potential and bought it.

One of the first things François had to do was to get a special zoning exception from Fairfax County. The property, as with all Great Falls commercial sites, was split zoned. He would need an exception to be able to locate a parking lot on the acreage that was zoned residential. François went to the Great Falls Citizens Association to ask for their support. They did not object to his plan but had grave doubts as to its potential success. Their first concern was the lack of a local market to support his establishment. There were only about 1,400 households in Great Falls, and approximately 10,000 in nearby Reston. Many association members also pointed out that they did not go out to eat–hardly surprising since there were no restaurants in Great Falls.

In fact, there were very few restaurants in all of Northern Virginia. The lack of dining options was mainly due to the fact that until 1969, Virginia did not permit liquor by the drink, sales of which brought in most of the profit for dinner restaurants. And, as François was about to find out, the Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) Board could be very difficult to deal with.

Undaunted, François persevered and closed Chez François on April 12, 1975. He assured his loyal and appreciative customers that he would be pleased to welcome them to his new restaurant, L'Auberge Chez François, in the fall of that year. It turned out that he was overly optimistic about his opening date.

François spent the next ten months personally supervising the remodeling of the old building–gutting the interior and refitting it with a professional kitchen, a dining room, a large fireplace and restrooms; adding new

windows with functioning shutters; refinishing the exterior in white stucco accented with antique timbers; constructing a new gravel parking lot, erecting a fence and planting trees, flowerbeds and an herb garden.

The antique arched front door was moved from the downtown restaurant as were the leaded stained glass windows. Inside, the dining room was finished in the half-timber style to match the exterior. The walls were decorated with the Haeringers' collection of art and vintage French copper cookware. Long-time friend and artist Jerry Jerominek provided some new art and painted murals depicting street scenes from François' hometown of Obernai. François and Marie Antoinette ordered custom tablecloths and dishes with simple border patterns similar to those that François had grown up with. While the location would be new to his old-time customers, they would feel comfortable with its familiar ambience. It would be a place where they would want to linger and enjoy a leisurely meal.

During the long months of remodeling, François was anxious to have the work finished and open his restaurant for business. He tolerated delays for county building permits and equipment orders and endured a long wait for his license from the Virginia ABC Board. A perfectionist about his cuisine, François spent time establishing contacts with local farmers who could supply him with fresh vegetables. He wanted the best available and Hiu Newcomb's Potomac Vegetable Farm on Route 7 at Beulah Road in Vienna was able to fill that request.

Upon receiving his ABC license, François settled on April 20, 1976, for his opening. The restaurant would offer two seatings for dinner, and reservations were to be made two weeks in advance. L'Auberge was now a destination restaurant. And because it was far from supply sources, the planning of food purchases was vital in case the kitchen ran short of a particularly popular item.

The near-disaster on opening night strongly drove that point home. François planned for about 75 diners that night with both a first and second seating. He did not advertise or formally announce the opening but mentioned it to those he spoke to in passing. The news spread quickly among his loyal customers who were excited to see his new place. In addition, a few Great Falls locals were quite interested in the novelty of what they thought of as a fancy French restaurant right in their own neighborhood. As calls came in, François could not say no to anyone who begged for a table. When the big night arrived, the restaurant was seriously overbooked.

"...a few Great Falls locals were quite interested in the novelty of what they thought of as a fancy French restaurant right in their own neighborhood."

François had planned that Marie Antoinette would make the pastries and that he and his sons Jacques and Robert would do the cooking. As the reservations mounted, he drafted long-time friend and master chef Jean Pierre Goyenvalle from the Lion d'Or Restaurant to help cook. A few employees from the city restaurant had come to Great Falls, including long-time hostess and dining room manager Frieda Bene and Chef Mr. Oh, but most of the staff was new and inexperienced. Somehow they got through the first seating and everyone had dinner, but it did not in any way go smoothly. As the second seating began, the cooks worried about running out of food.

Fortunately for François, fate delivered a reprieve from what could have been a disaster. A thunderstorm blew in and knocked out all the electricity. At the time, Great Falls had power outages with almost every thunderstorm, and the outages usually lasted for at least three to four hours. Knowing that this would probably be the case, the staff apologized to their hungry clients and sent them on their way without dinner.

As time went on, operations returned to François's exacting standards, but it was not easy. Because there was no public transportation to Great Falls, kitchen helpers and dishwashers were hard to find. For the first few years, the Haeringers had to rely on local high school students who wanted part-time jobs. This was not a good source of labor–if there was a big dance or football game, or if the students got bad report cards, they didn't come to work.

These start-up pains were fairly well disguised, and the restaurant quickly resumed its popularity. Chez François became a popular destination for celebrating important life events. The local population proudly welcomed this addition to the community.

François remained a stern taskmaster and ran his kitchen with military precision. He did not have his employees punch a clock. Instead, they were required to greet him when they arrived and personally tell him good-bye when they left. He was also a good instructor. His common maxim: "There is only one way to do it here–my way." This attitude created some problems with his sons as they tried to get him to change to more modern menus or systems, but he held on to his philosophy. In the meantime, some young cooks who would later make their own reputations as star chefs benefited from his training. Patrick O'Connell and his former partner Reinhardt Lynch, who later founded the Inn at Little Washington, were among those who spent time in François's kitchen.

While François adamantly refused to embrace the changing food styles promoted by diet-conscious Americans, he did give in to a few changes. Jacques finally convinced him that there was not much of a market among modern diners for foods such as sweetbreads and brains. François also turned to native products to improve on classics. When a dish called for a fish such as pike that he could only get frozen, he would substitute fresh rockfish. He added items to the menu that used Chesapeake Bay crabmeat and served shad roe in season.

An outdoor dining garden was a popular addition to the restaurant, and another dining room, the garden room, was added in 1979. Its timber frame was salvaged from local 18th-century barns. It wasn't quite finished for the New Year's Eve celebration that year, which was a pity because the Haeringers could have filled every table. Two weeks before the holiday, the phone was busy all morning and there was a line of hopeful patrons at the front door.

Those who got reservations found the dining experience to be worth the wait. The food, service and ambience were superb. Many of the diners were Great Falls residents who enjoyed greeting each other from one table to the next. When dinner was over, Frieda opened the doors to the new room. It was chilly, with unfinished walls and a plywood floor, but she had set up a record player so everyone could dance.

Through the years, the restaurant has proved that consistency of quality and style will draw repeat customers. On that point François was correct. He was able to add another small dining room in 1992. By then he was long past the age when most people would have retired, especially from such a demanding job that required him to be at work six days a week. He had achieved his lifelong dream of a family-owned and operated French country inn. His wife wrote the daily menu and did the bookkeeping. Sons Jacques and Robert were chefs in the kitchen, and son Paul was in charge of the dining room with Frieda. François still decided what was offered on the menu every day and remained a hands-on cook. No dish was allowed to be served before he personally tasted it and made any required adjustments. Robert once told his father, "You're never going to retire. You're just going to fall into the onion soup one day and disappear."

While he was always welcoming and unfailingly courteous, François was most comfortable in his kitchen. And in spite of the delicious dishes that he concocted every day, his own favorite snack was Spam and a beer. He balked when styles shifted in the 1990s and chefs were expected to be showmen. François didn't want to roam around the dining room greeting customers or hold cooking demonstrations or write cookbooks. Fortunately Jacques was able to do all of those things and add another piece of modern restaurant culture to the traditions guarded by his father.

François never did retire. At age 91, after a day at the restaurant, he fell and fractured his hip. There were related complications and he passed away the following day, June 3, 2010, leaving a wonderful legacy in Chez François.

The restaurant still serves meals in François' traditional style using his recipes. Jacques is the Chef de Cuisine and Paul manages the dining rooms. Together they supervise 87 employees. A few changes have been made–ones of which François would no doubt have approved. A large vegetable garden has been planted on the acreage behind the restaurant, and much of the produce served in the summer months is homegrown. Jacques opened a brasserie downstairs in 2011. The same quality of food is served there as in the upstairs dining room but in a more casual atmosphere and featuring an à la carte menu. The quiet bar is a comfortable place to meet friends. And throughout the entire establishment, the influence of François' exacting standards still prevails. é