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WHAT'S EATING GEORGES PERRIER?

After 30 years at the top, he's battling changing tastes, flashy competition and the inevitable ravages of time—but he's not ready to throw in the toque just yet

"Everybody want to fock Georges Perrier in the ass," Georges Perrier was saying. Lunch at Brasserie Perrier was winding down, and the owner's voice filled the bar. The voice was almost cartoonish; French-accented, octave-leaping, disdainful of syntax, it swung from soft, chiding singsong to asphyxiated growl to contralto screech. "Fock Georges Perrier in the ass!" the voice barked, as if Perrier were a fairground pitchman goading patrons to step right up and try their luck.

Customers drinking coffee glanced over at the 58-year-old man who just a few years before was almost never seen out of his chef's whites. Now, sitting at a table in the second-built of his three restaurants a few weeks before September 11th, he wore the finely striped monogrammed shirt, tasseled loafers and Cartier wristwatch of the businessman he had become. Perrier was meeting with his publicist and his graphic designer, talking about having new menus printed and griping that everyone—printers, florists, everyone—tries to gouge him on pricing. He looked around wildly. "Ohhhhhh," he said. "Eets Georges Perrier! Ah theenk I weel put mah deek in hees ass!" He scooted back in his chair, squared his hips to the table, and made a downward thrusting motion with one fist. "Ah yes," he said, "let's fock Georges Perrier in the ass!"

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Perrier left the restaurant and hobbled east on Walnut Street. His usual hybrid of swagger and waddle—he isn't much taller than five feet—now featured a limp. In July, at the home of a friend of his girlfriend, he'd opened the door to what he thought was a bathroom but turned out to be the basement. He skied down a staircase, broke both his heels, and spent the next three months in a wheelchair. Three months later, it still hurt to walk.

Today, he was going to drive out to Wayne for a late lunch at Le Mas Perrier, the Provençal restaurant he'd opened a year before. After lunch, he planned to spend the rest of the afternoon getting ready for a political fund-raiser he was to host at his home that evening for gubernatorial candidate Ed Rendell. But first, he had some paperwork to do. He limped along Walnut Street toward his corporate offices, past Le Bec-Fin and the intersection with Georges Perrier Place, a kiss from his adoring adopted city on the occasion of its favorite restaurateur's 50th birthday, in 1993.

Upstairs at his office, he talked business with an administrative employee—details of upcoming banquets, catered weddings, that night's fund-raiser—then went into the small room where his desk sat. One wall boasted a framed Xerox of a *New York Times* article from 1974. Written by Craig Claiborne, then the newspaper's all-powerful food critic, the article put Le Bec-Fin on the gastronomic map. Accompanying the story was a black-and-white photograph depicting a leaner, darker-haired, 30-years-younger version of the man in whose office it hung. Now, Georges's hair was graying, showing flashes of silver and a streak of white. His midsection had sprouted a potbelly.

Elsewhere in the room, other laurels from Georges's career were on display. In the course of Le Bec's 31 years, national magazine surveys had deemed the restaurant the best in the country, and in 1976, Georges was inducted into an elite fraternity of the world's greatest French chefs. Of particular importance to Georges were the five stars Le Bec was routinely awarded by the Mobil Guide, putting it in a highly select circle.

Now it had been cast out. In January of 2000, without ceremony or explanation, Mobil removed Le Bec's fifth star. The demotion devastated Perrier just as he was embarking on the creation of Le Mas, a \$3 million project. Stunned, he eventually made the wrenching decision to try to reinvigorate the kitchen of Le Bec by turning it over to a young French chef from New York, Frederic Côte. In short order, Perrier suffered other setbacks, including the breaking of his heels and the filing of two sexual harassment and sex discrimination lawsuits against him. (He

has denied the charges, and the cases are pending in federal court.) But losing the star hurt the most. On a shelf beside his desk, Georges had propped the Mobil 2000 plaque awarding Le Bec its shrunken constellation, the phantom fifth star taunting him with what he had lost and what he hoped to recapture. He was considering ripping out Le Bec's longstanding Louis XVI appointments and redecorating in a more contemporary style. A portrait of Napoleon hung on the wall behind him.

Life was simpler when Perrier had only one restaurant and cooked every night. Now he is a CEO with a small empire to run, a personality customers want to see and talk to, a brand whose name opens wallets. He tries to visit each of his three restaurants every day, and he regularly hosts charity dinners at his home. Beside his desk, a folded-up padded table awaited his weekly massage. His chef's jacket hung on a wooden stand.

Georges sat, head bent over a stack of checks that needed his signature. Le Bec-Fin alone has 96 employees, to whom he pays more than \$2 million annually. His total payroll encompasses 250 people—he is the patriarch of an oversized family. He doesn't talk about it publicly, but there are employees he has supported through rehab two and three times, and he has silently helped others in more generous ways. For years he paid for an employee's asthmatic son to travel each summer to the Alps to clear his lungs.

Georges began scrawling his signature on the checks. "What the fuck is that?" he said suddenly. "Wendy! What is that shit—US Bancorp! What's that?" His assistant, sitting in the next room, informed him it was one of his credit-card bills. He resumed flipping through the checks, signing his name with a ballpoint. "Fucking shit," he said. "Wendy!" She appeared in the door. "Who the fuck is Jennifer Belezzi?" A hostess at Le Bec, Wendy informed Georges, and yes, she was owed a week's vacation; she had been working for him for more than a year.

Georges finished with the checks, then drove his dark-green Mercedes sedan home to Haverford to pick up his assistant. He is a terrible driver. He had a Rolls-Royce once, but he totaled it. He views seatbelts as an imposition. Beneath his dashboard, he'd installed a radar detector. As he headed for his house, hitting speeds of more than 80 miles per hour, his stop-and-start driving unsettled the contents of his passenger's stomach, while Georges blithely honked at other cars, screaming "Asshole!," and complained about how many bad drivers were out there.

At his home, a formally decorated ranch house with a pool, he and his assistant, Liliane Nino, a middle-aged woman who worked for Air France for many years, climbed into an SUV driven by his chauffeur and headed for lunch at Le Mas. There, he would fuss over flowers, hook his arms through those of a pair of matrons to escort them on a tour of the restaurant, sign another stack of checks, discuss the restaurant's wine-by-the-glass program with a manager, and have a light lunch of warm lentil salad and mahimahi à la Provençal.

In the wake of his forced convalescence, during which he'd crawled around his bedroom on all fours and had to be carried downstairs at Le Bec by three employees, he was reasserting himself, as he had several times before in his career. In the early '80s, feeling Le Bec drifting, he'd fired the chef and resumed oversight; just two years back, he'd purged Brasserie Perrier of several employees following a period when he felt he'd ceded too much authority to a manager. Once more, he wanted to be in full command. "Now we work again," he said as he and Liliane rolled toward Le Mas. "We are working again. I am retaking control. I'm taking charge. The old Georges Perrier burn in fire now. This—" He held up a hand to command attention. "This is the new Georges Perrier."

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On a Thursday evening a few weeks later, after the first dinner service at Le Bec-Fin, Georges went downstairs to eat at his Bar Lyonnais, which occupies the floor below Le Bec. His lawyer, John Pelino, was sitting at the bar with his wife. The three talked for a while; then a manager asked Georges if he was ready for his table. "Please, please don't push people," Georges said. "Don't be pushy. You very like my mother."

"You are crabby today," Karen Pelino said. "What are you crabby for?"

"I need sex," Georges said. He looked down the bar in the direction of a middle-aged blond woman who was sitting by herself. "Did you hear what I say, Lisa?"

"I heard you," the woman said wearily, as though she'd heard it before. Georges grinned and sidled up behind her chair, draping his arms around her neck. Then he took a seat at a table where Liliane and an old friend, Joel, were already sitting. They began talking about the troubled restaurant industry.

Georges's business, already suffering from the slump in the economy, had fallen even further after September 11th. More than half his banquet bookings for the month had been canceled. He understood why—he himself had scrapped a planned September trip to France to visit his parents—but that gave him little comfort. "I wanna take a gun, I wanna shoot myself," he said, "but it's not gonna do anything. I wanna jump out the window, but it's not going to do anything." He mused aloud, as he sometimes did, about opening a neighborhood restaurant and charging \$10 an entrée.

The waiter brought appetizers.

"Are they okay in the kitchen upstairs, without me, for five minutes?" Georges asked.

"Yes," the waiter said.

"They okay? Eh? They okay?"

"We're okay," the waiter said.

After Georges lost his fifth star in January 2000, TV trucks showed up at the restaurant. He had what he calls "a nervous breakdown," then suffered a deep spell of depression. Despite wielding only a minute fraction of the clout of the Michelin guides in Europe, the Mobil guide is the closest American approximation to that tyrannical system, which over the years has driven French chefs to bankruptcy and even suicide. "I was devastated, because I have it for so long, and suddenly is not coming anymore," Georges said after finishing his order of steak frites. "You say, 'What I have done wrong?'" He began to act out. One night, eating at La Parisienne on the Main Line, he pronounced the coq au vin "an insult" and spilled a glass of wine on the table, prompting the owner to accuse Georges publicly of "insecurity and jealousy" and demand an apology.

As Georges talked about the lost star, his eyes teared up. He said he had been desperate to understand how this terrible event could have befallen him, and he undertook an internal investigation. He convened a staff meeting where he asked if anything had happened in service that could have brought this about. He said he wouldn't be upset; he just wanted to know. No one said anything. He consulted a medium in Chicago, an older woman named Beth whom he has been calling for several years for help in making decisions. (For instance, she gave him the go-ahead to do the Le Mas project.) Anytime he is considering making an important hire, he gives Beth the prospect's birth date, and she consults her zodiac. When it came to the lost star, Beth told Georges that someone who worked for him was responsible.

Finally, a friend at the Mobil guide called Georges and, in a breach of Mobil protocol, explained what had happened. It turned out Georges's astrologer was right. On the night when four Mobil officials ate at Le Bec, a waiter and a busboy had argued near their table. Three times, the Mobil officials asked the employees to take their argument elsewhere, as it was disrupting their meal. Georges's source at Mobil provided him with the date of the incident, enabling him to review the checks from that night and figure out who was working. Georges deduced which check belonged to the Mobil party, and his secretary was able to figure out who the busboy had been.

In the course of denying everything, the busboy said it wasn't his fault—the waiter had provoked the argument. Georges met with the waiter, who'd worked for him for 16 years, and said he couldn't believe that a customer had had to ask him three times to stop arguing. Georges couldn't understand this, he told the waiter, and he was also upset that the waiter had lied to him by not owning up to the offense. Georges said he wouldn't fire him, but one more mistake and he'd be gone. A couple of months later, a customer called to complain about pushy service from the waiter, and Georges dismissed him.

As part of a campaign to restore Le Bec to five-star status, Georges hired a new manager, Nicolas Fanucci, who had worked for Alain Ducasse and who vigorously set about updating and refining service at Le Bec. But when Mobil announced the awards again in January 2001, Le Bec still had four stars. “So, I been punish, I guess,” Georges said. “It’s not so much tough because I lost the star. It’s tough for my ego. This is an ego thing. Because you say you not part of the family of the 18 best restaurants in the nation. Now, I’m four-star. I’m same as the Brasserie. I’m same as Neil Stein. I’m the same as Rouge. Rouge have four star. I mean, do you think I should be the same as Rouge? Four star to Rouge and four star to Georges Perrier? You comparing cauliflower to roses. Rouge can be very good, but don’t compare to Le Bec-Fin.”

With Mobil set to announce the stars once again in January 2002 and a new chef running the Le Bec kitchen, Georges thought he had a better shot this year. “I hope we will have it back,” he said, “because it will bring some more happiness, a little bit, from my misery that I have since this. ... We will get the five star back. I know we will. We have work all year very very very hard to get it back. So if we don’t get it back, then that proves to me we have not done good enough job.”

After finishing his dinner with Liliane and Joel, Georges ran into the Pelinos again, this time outside Le Bec. It was 11 o’clock, and they were now with John Pelino’s daughter Clare, Perrier’s longtime publicist.

“You were cooking on the line tonight?” Clare asked.

“Yes, I was cooking on the line,” Georges said. “Nobody believe I cook on the line, but I was cooking on the line.”

Georges had spent the first dinner service moving restlessly around the claustrophobic Le Bec kitchen—seasoning a piece of red mullet, whisking a saffron sauce, keeping himself busy—but some things he could no longer do. Since 1995, when he reached into a Robot Coupe commercial food mixer to change a blade and cut four fingers to the bone, his right hand had given him trouble. Despite four hours of microsurgery and months of rehab, the finer knifework, like cutting the tomato diamonds that accompany his *galette de crab*, was now beyond him.

And he was lately something of a stranger in his own kitchen. In the spot on the hot line that had always belonged to Georges, Frederic Côte now stood. Georges had hired him away from Daniel Boulud, the renowned New York chef, after a three-hour phone conversation in which he’d sought Boulud’s advice, and after Georges’s astrologer had concurred that it would be an auspicious hire. Now, when line cooks said “Chef”—which for decades meant Georges—they were looking at his tall, dark-eyed, goateed young successor. As Côte and his crew busily plated updated versions of Le Bec classics as well as such new Côte creations as an olive soup and a potato brûlée, Georges had stood off to one side, sipping at a glass of Vittel water.

On the sidewalk outside Le Bec-Fin, the Pelinos begged Georges to come to their house to see the new kitchen Karen was near completing. After trying out different excuses—“I been up since 5:30.” “You don’t have any good wine”—Georges relented, but first told how he had come to the rescue at a charity auction at Fort Mifflin the night before. “They couldn’t sell shit at that auction,” Georges said, “and then they say, ‘Georges Perrier, cooking demonstration for 10.’” When it didn’t draw the minimum bid of \$2,500, Georges upped the ante, saying he’d do it at his home, and for 20 people. That went for \$4,000, and then Georges agreed to do another one for the underbidder, for \$3,500, raising a total of \$7,500.

“They’re going to call you St. Georges,” Karen Pelino said.

“Georges, that’s huge,” Clare Pelino said. “That’s huge.”

“I’m too good,” Georges said.

“They should be kissing your feet,” Karen Pelino said.

“Yes they should,” Georges said, then thought better of it. “They should send me some customer,” he said. “That’s what they should do.”

He got into his Mercedes—his driver had gone AWOL a few days before—and noticed a white slip of paper on the windshield. He had been ticketed on Georges Perrier Place. “That’s not right,” Georges said. “That’s my fucking street. Fucking ticket on my street. Ridiculous I get a ticket. Piss me off.” He pulled into traffic, still muttering. “I hate to get ticket. A ticket on my car. Stupid city.” He spat out the window. “I’m annoyed. Annoyed. So annoyed. I don’t care about the ticket; it’s just the principle.”

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The following night, Georges didn’t work in the Le Bec kitchen, on Chef’s orders. It was a particularly busy Friday, the first busy night since September 11th—157 covers expected—and Côte had asked him to give the cooks some breathing room. So Georges shuttled restlessly around the restaurant, adjusting the thermostat (“Is it cold?”), giving a young line cook just back from doing a stage in Lyons a punch in the chest (“Do you learn something?”), answering the Le Bec phone (“I should be in reservation business”) and making cameo appearances in the kitchen. (“We busy tonight.... Fire these fucking people! ... I need pickup! ... Go! Go! ... I hope you have lot of lobster. ... Holy cow! ... Chef, Table 8 is a friend of mine.”) Then he switched to front-man mode.

Georges’s presence in the Le Bec dining room had long been a part of the restaurant’s appeal; people calling to make reservations would demand to know whether he would be there. Tonight, he greeted an Eagles executive, drank champagne with a society couple who’d been coming to his restaurant for years, seasoned the sauce at tableside for a couple of regulars who’d ordered the lobster press, kneaded the shoulders of a longtime customer and offered his recommendation of the lobster and the rabbit, towed off a vacated table, abused the service bartender (“Your bar is pretty shitty tonight”), and otherwise kept himself busy.

Around 9 p.m., his girlfriend, Andrea, arrived. Tall, dark-haired and 32 years old, she wore a long, sleeveless black astrakhan coat, an expensive-looking silk blouse, and pointy heels. She and Georges embraced and went downstairs to have a glass of wine. They decided to have dinner at the Brasserie.

Domestic happiness was one of the pleasures Georges had sacrificed in his long marriage to the restaurant. He’d been married for 11 years to an American woman—they were divorced in 1982—with whom he’d had a 28-year-old daughter, Genevieve, an actress living in Brooklyn. For many years, his relationship with his daughter was strained. Throughout her childhood, he worked from 7 a.m. to 2 a.m. and saw her only on Sundays, except for those occasions when she’d toddle around the restaurant. (Once, she fell into a pot of hot stock; she was immediately plucked out and swaddled in a tablecloth filled with ice.)

Georges felt guilty about the years when he wasn’t around to raise Genevieve, and recently they had become very close, having had a candid conversation about Georges’s lapses as a father. “I say, ‘Za, I feel bad,’” Georges recalled. “I love you, I always have love you. But I know I have not been a father that you expect, and I’m very proud that you came out the way you are. You are a wonderful daughter. And you have wonderful *qualité*. And when I have not give you what I can give you, like a normal father can give you, because I wanted to succeed so much, I sacrificed everything for the restaurant, and not enough for my family.’ For years, I never took a day off. I worked seven days a week. ... But you know,” Georges said now, reflecting on it, “*restaurateur* life is not a normal life. I don’t think so, by any means, you can be a *restaurateur* and expecting living a normal life, ‘cause it’s not gonna happen if you care about what you doing.” Then he seemed to have doubts again. “Everyone needs a parent when they young,” he said.

Georges never remarried. Since his divorce, he’d had a string of young, pretty girlfriends. He seemed to have more in common with Andrea, a culinary-school graduate who once worked in the kitchen of the Four Seasons’ Fountain restaurant and now advises wealthy people on their diets. She’d first met Georges downstairs at the Le Bec bar, and they had been dating since April.

Earlier in the evening, Georges appeared anxious, but Andrea’s presence seemed to relax him. As he perused the Brasserie menu, weighing what to have for dinner, Andrea teased him about his eating. “Diet is against my religion,” Georges said. They ordered Belon oysters to start, and a basket of bread was put out. Since the opening of Le Mas, Georges’s restaurants have made their own bread.

“C’est bon,” Georges said.

“C’est très bon,” Andrea said.

As they ate, Georges never stopped monitoring the room. From time to time, he got up from his seat and went into the kitchen to yell at the hustling crew—part cheering fan (“Go! Go! Go!”), part galley master (“C’mon. C’mon. Gimme fuckin’ food! Pickup!”)—before returning to his seat at the bar. Once, when he noticed a family that seemed to need attention, he flagged down the maître d’ and asked what was going on. Another time, he left the Brasserie for 20 minutes to go down the street to Le Bec, where a customer was celebrating his 40th birthday in the mezzanine room; there, Georges performed a trick he has done many times, including on “Late Night with David Letterman,” opening a bottle of champagne with a saber in a single stroke.

As he sat with Andrea at the Brasserie bar, she ran her fingers through his hair. He seemed momentarily content. He smoked a Davidoff cigarillo. Around 11 p.m., he rubbed his eyes and said, “I feel very tired.” On the TV screen above the bar, a Flyers game had given way to a Dennis Rodman interview. “Look at thees asshole,” Georges said to the bartender, who happened to be the brother of actress Kim Delaney. “Patrick, how can a woman go out with a man like this?”

Andrea kissed Georges’s forehead. Then he left to look in at Le Mas before going home to sleep.

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Sometimes, to get away from the ever-encroaching distractions of his own business, Georges eats down the block from Le Bec at the restaurant of Susanna Foo, who has been highly acclaimed for her singular fusion of French and Asian cuisines. Like Perrier, she has published a glossy coffeetable cookbook. Their restaurants, along with Neil Stein’s Striped Bass, are the mainstays of Rittenhouse Row. Unlike Georges, though, Foo has never expanded beyond her one restaurant, and she can still be found in the kitchen every day.

Lunching there a few weeks after his dinner with Andrea, Georges was having trouble finding something on the menu that he wanted to eat. “I cannot have spring roll, it’s gonna be too greasy,” he said. “Maybe I can have the steamed veal dumpling. I only eat the inside. And maybe I have the Mongolian lamb. And I will told them no, no, no, no nothing on the lamb. Just the lamb.”

For three months after his accident, he was unable to exercise at all. He still hadn’t been able to resume playing tennis, but in the past month, he had begun working out three times a week with a personal trainer, and three days ago, he’d gone on the Atkins diet. Already he had dropped from 173 to 165, he said, and he wanted to lose at least another seven pounds. “I start feeling better,” Georges said, “and I’m start to feel my energy, and I start to feel I can walk again. I feel already I look great.” He sucked in his stomach and patted it. “I got a pretty good control of my body,” Georges said. “I have no bad habits. Yes, I love wine. That’s a habit. I love good wine.” He has about 1,200 bottles in his home cellar.

The waiter arrived with appetizers and put them in the wrong places. “No, you got it wrong, sir,” Georges said. “Wrong. You could not work for me. Bad.”

The waiter corrected his mistake.

“I forgive you,” Georges said.

The physical and existential wages of being a chef began when Georges signed on as an apprentice. Born into a bourgeois family in Lyons, the son of a jeweler father and a biologist mother, he deeply upset his parents with his decision, at age 14, to become a chef. He left home and didn’t return until his apprenticeship was over, three years later. The apprenticeship was hard. Wake-up was at 5:30 in the morning, and work ended at midnight. The chefs were tough. “They kick your ass, they hit you, they bang you, they dig you,” Georges said, sitting on a banquette at

Susanna Foo. “It was hard, really really hard. It was bad. It was too bad. I cannot talk nicely about it, because it was not nice.” His left wrist still bears the scars of an incident when, late in getting a fire going, he tried to accelerate the process by pouring oil directly onto charcoal, burning himself badly.

Georges weathered additional abuse from his fellow apprentices, who came from working-class backgrounds and resented their middle-class peer. “It was traumatic,” Georges recalled. “They have tough time to accept me. And they let me know and make me cause great pain, but I’m not going to discuss here. It was very difficult, and I have to fight very hard to stay. But I prove them wrong, because when the apprenticeship came [to an end], I was the number one apprentice.”

Georges then worked at two of the great mid-century restaurants in France. La Pyramide, founded by the legendary Fernand Point in Vienne, was the first restaurant in France to win three stars from Michelin, and before Georges arrived it had already graduated such giants of modern French gastronomy as Paul Bocuse, Roger Vergé and the Troisgros brothers. Georges rose to saucier at the restaurant, then went to work at Oustau de Baumanière, a Michelin three-star in Provence.

Now, at Susanna Foo, he pushed his plate of lamb aside and pulled a gilt Le Bec matchbox from his pocket. The sulfur heads were pinched off, and Georges started picking at his teeth with a matchstick. Foo stopped by the table and asked about the lamb.

“Very good,” Georges said, “but I, I, I’m on diet, so ... Wonderful.”

“I wish I have a restaurant like this,” Georges said, after Foo had walked away, “because, you know, there is five gram of meat.” He pointed at the remains of his stir-fry, a hillock of purple cabbage and white disks. “It’s only vegetables,” he said. “I wish I have a restaurant like this.”

He quizzically regarded one of the gummy disks. “What is this?” he said, poking it. “I gotta ask. Is like a starch. What is that?” He pulled at it. “What is that? Is a noodle? Eh?” He took the disk between his fingers and pulled it in opposite directions. “Very starchy. It’s like ... élastique. I gotta ask the waiter.” He flagged one down and interrogated him. “Thank you,” Georges said, satisfied. “Chinese pasta.”

Georges likes to stay up-to-date by reading other chefs’ cookbooks. He said he admired Chicago chef Charlie Trotter’s, and he had read the book by Thomas Keller, chef-owner of the French Laundry, three times. Located in the Napa Valley, the French Laundry, regarded by some critics as the best restaurant in America today, was the one restaurant Georges had never been to that he wanted to visit. “And he’s a very nice man,” Georges said of Keller. “I never met him, but I know some customer went there, and [he] says, ‘We not have the pleasure to have Georges, but you can told him: ‘We want to thank him he has done what he has done toward the industry. Because of him, this is what we are now.’ That was nice of him. Really very nice man. I have never meet him. I love him.”

Patrick Feury, Susanna Foo’s chef de cuisine, came over to pay his respects to the master. “How are you,” Georges said. “Nice to meet you.” Feury mentioned that he’d had dinner at Le Bec a few nights earlier, and it had been wonderful. He was staring at the uneaten food on Georges’s plate. “I’m sorry I didn’t eat much, because I’m on diet,” Georges explained. “And I can only eat meat. And I was afraid to ask to only have meat on my plate.”

Georges had arrived at an age of heightened health concerns, and over the summer he’d driven to Washington, along with Jean Banchet, the 61-year-old former owner of Le Francais in Chicago, to visit their friend and fellow chef Jean-Louis Palladin, who lay dying of lung cancer in the hospital. Georges also co-hosted a fund-raiser in New York to help pay Palladin’s health-care costs. “It is sad,” Georges said, leaning back on the banquette. “Great chef. Great talent. You know, I think I learned that you have to enjoy the life. All the bullshit that we have every day means nothing. It means absolutely nothing. Today you are here, and tomorrow you can leave. So you gotta take the life a little bit not so seriously, much more relax.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t eat much,” Georges said, on the street outside Susanna Foo. “But ... they were five gram of Jamison lamb. How much they charge for that? It was prix fixe? Five gram of meat.” He chuckled at the thought.

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The next Tuesday morning, around 7 a.m., Georges arrived at Pennock flower wholesalers in Germantown. He was with his assistant Liliane and Jean Banchet. Before Banchet left the kitchen of Le Francais a few years ago, it had five Mobil stars. Banchet and Georges are best friends; they talk every day on the phone. Now, Banchet was staying at Georges's house for two weeks. He had short black hair and a goatee. On this morning, he was wearing a black knit sweatsuit and Nike cross-trainers, while Georges wore baggy jeans, an untucked Academy of Music t-shirt and a blue fleece jacket.

Ever since Georges had decided he could save money by doing the flowers at his restaurants himself, he'd been spending a full day each week personally buying and arranging them. But Liliane was clearly in charge of the operation. At the Pennock warehouse, she gave Jean and Georges errands, and they went off to freezer rooms to count out roses and orchids and birds-of-paradise. Nicolas Fanucci, the manager at Le Bec, showed up to help transport the flowers, and everyone scattered. Nicolas took a carful to Le Bec, Liliane drove a load to Brasserie, and Jean Banchet and Georges got into Georges's silver Pathfinder and made the delivery to Le Mas. Then they headed for Center City.

They were having fun. As they passed a road crew on a tree-lined back road, Georges eyed a worker standing idle. The worker was dark-skinned and had a wispy beard. "Are you terroriste?" Georges asked through the glass, cackling madly. "He look like terroriste," Jean agreed, laughing. When they got into town, Georges went off to Le Bec to arrange flowers, while Banchet headed to Tower Records.

Later, Banchet arrived first for lunch at Brasserie. During his fortnight here, he would talk to Georges' chefs and managers, eat at his restaurants, spend time in his kitchens, then report to Georges. But his friendly advice extended to all areas of Georges's life, including romance. "I think he miss somebody at home," Banchet said. "He have to have somebody he love at home. This is what I think is most important." Banchet had been married to the same woman for decades; she'd run the front of the house at Le Francais. "You know," he said, "if you have nobody at home, you go home, you watch TV, you read the newspaper. This is boring, you know what I mean? Nobody to talk with." Banchet said he wanted to protect Georges. "I don't know if Andrea is the right one," Banchet said. "I don't know. I say: Find somebody simple, modest, low-key, which is not after your money. When they see all this, they see the house, they see the restaurants, I'm sure they say, 'Jeez, I don't have to work anymore.' I tell him: 'Don't look always for beautiful.' He like these young chick looks like a hooker."

When Georges arrived for lunch, he was clearly stressed. Sitting at the table with his friend Jean and his assistant Liliane, he squeezed his eyes shut, winched his head around on his neck, chain-smoked Davidoffs, and nervously worked a matchstick in his teeth. Liliane solicitously put a hand on his cheek. Georges and Liliane and Jean were speaking among themselves in French when a new waiter walked past. Georges asked who he was, and upon learning that he was working part-time at Stephen Starr's Alma de Cuba, next door, said: "Wonderful. Give him a job. Take him out of there. Take him out of there. Come here."

The waiter took a few tentative steps forward, and Georges began grilling him: Was Alma busy? During the week? It was? "Hmm," Georges said. "I'm impress. I'm very impress that so many people like starches." The Nuevo Latino cuisine of Alma de Cuba makes generous use of starchy fruits and root vegetables like yuca and taro and plantain. "I don't like starches," Georges said. "What, you gotta have everything for everybody? Only starches. How many starches." His face twisted into a sneer, and his voice turned demonic. "More starches!" he shrieked, pounding the table. "Get me more starches!"

A waiter took dessert orders.

"Starches, eh?" Georges said, having trouble letting go of the topic. Then he abruptly changed tones again. "No, no," he said, "it's a great restaurant. I like the restaurant. It's good." He chuckled darkly. Georges was upset because he had heard that Starr had described Le Bec-Fin as "stale" to a former Le Bec chef applying for a job.

“Steve Starr,” Georges said, “Steve Starr.” He chewed on the name as if it might be a rancid piece of meat. He was getting worked up. Suddenly he held up an index finger, and his eyes seemed to lock onto something no one else could see. “I declare war on Steve Starr!” he announced. Jean and Liliane were silent. “I don’t give a shit,” Georges continued. “It’s true. It’s a war. It’s a fucking war. I declare the war! It’s a war!”

He placed his declaration squarely in an honorable gastronomic tradition, invoking the feuds of his mentor, Paul Bocuse, who had once dismissed chef Alain Ducasse as a souped-up BMW beside his own well-engineered Mercedes. Of Michel Guerard, pioneer of a lighter, more diet-conscious style of French cooking dubbed *cuisine minceur*, Bocuse snipped: “I’m a chef, not a doctor.”

For 30 years, Georges had waged relentless war against imperfection and inconsistency, maintaining Le Bec as the longest-running act in French-American gastronomy. Now, he was fighting to reclaim Le Bec’s fifth star, and in December, *Esquire* would name Le Mas Perrier one of the 23 best new restaurants in the country (which wouldn’t stop Georges from firing its chef shortly after the magazine hit newsstands). Georges wasn’t about to raise the white flag for a local theme-restaurant impresario.

“I think it’s not fair for Steve Starr to say that to one of my chef,” Georges said. “I really do. Because it reflect on me.” Why not call Starr and clear the air? “Listen,” Georges said, minutes after declaring jihad. “You want me to start a war? I start a war if I start to say something. I will have more enemies than I have friend. You know how many enemies I have? They hates my guts. Everybody hate my guts.” Georges sucked in the last of his cigarillo, pressed it out in an ashtray, and went upstairs to continue making beautiful flower arrangements.