James Beard

A few weeks of searching turned up the class kitchen in the Seaside High School home economics department. Not only was the classroom ideal, but the enthusiasm of the school, the school district head and especially that of the class teacher were gratifying beyond words. Early this year, Beard completed arrangements with the school district for lease of the space following the end of the school year. The next problem was students.

Early in January, a small item in Jean Henniger's column in the Sunday Oregonian mentioned the forthcoming classes. Beard's phone in New York, my phone in Portland, and the phones of many of Beard's friends in Portland immediately started jangling. Within six weeks forty-eight persons had signed for the three classes and as many more were on a waiting list. Beard came out in late April for preliminary arrangements, and we were on our way.

I had sat in occasionally on the fringes of Beard's New York classes, and so had some idea of the routine. On Beard's instructions I sounded out markets and delicatessens in Astoria, Seaside and Portland, checking availability of food and ability to respond to special orders.

French cuisine requires a mass of implements which one could not expect to find in an American high school classroom. Beard had shipped from San Francisco and New York more than a dozen large cranes of tools, knives, pots, pans and small appliances.

The first morning of class — indeed the first week — is blurted in my mind. Despite careful planning there were last minute crises. Consider — the first week we were two classes each day — one from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and a second from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Each day each class prepared a five- to eight-course meal. Very often we might have as many as two or three variations of a single course. The quantity of food prepared had to be adequate to feed twenty persons, including Beard, assistants and students.

Everything was made from scratch. In class, fresh ingredients purchased that day. We bought eggs, a dozen at a time, whipping cream by quarts and butter (sweet butter, unsalted) by the case. This last was available only in Portland.

The crises seemed to come tumbling in bundles, never gently, one at a time. Mostly they were crises of timing, the inflexible class scheduling and the need for fresh ingredients each day.

Thirty minutes before class time on the first morning, as I was completing the buying for that day, I discovered to my horror that there was not a drop of whipping cream to be had in Seaside. It was the height of the strawberry season. I am confident the day before every family in Seaside and every family visiting Seaside had had strawberry shortcake with whipped cream. We needed a quart of whipping cream — now.

For some minutes I indulged in a wild fantasy of pursuing, wild-eyed, an equally wild-eyed and bawling cow across field and pasture. Fortunately a local creamery came to our rescue.

Another time it was raisins; then parsley; then onions; and so it went.

On the whole our market in Seaside, fish market and bakery in Astoria, and a roadside market between Gearhart and Warrenston, performed admirably — sometimes heroically, as did those members of the Seaside High School staff who assisted.

Returning to class that first day shortly after noon I was not even mildly surprised to see it operating like a smooth and carefully tended machine. Beard still moved swiftly from team to team, seemingly unflappable. The many dishes began to appear in their completed form, the long row of tables was set with twenty places; anticipation was high.

The course were crepes, stacked as in a many-layered cake. This was filled, layered on layer, with sauteed and lightly seasoned minced mushrooms, in French — duxelles.

Next came crepes rolled with fresh crab in a curry sauce. This was followed by great, fragrant baking dishes of an Italian version of stuffed crepes, rather like a cannelloni, with a rich tomato sauce over crepes rolled with Italian sausages, ricotta and grated parmesan cheese, then baked. Dessert was crepes, again stacked like the duxelles crepes and cut in little wedges, but filled with layers of a rich chocolate sauce made with heavy cream and cognac, then topped with whipped cream and shaved bitter-sweet chocolate.

This was not to be the last. The chocolate crepes were followed by Crepes Directoire, a dish of bananas, baked and cut in half, seasoned with lemon and kirsch, then rolled in a crepe, sauced with a caramelized butter and orange sauce and flamed with kirsch.

Truly, Beard's earlier words — "Do not expect to lose weight in this class" — were accurate with a vengeance.

Space here does not permit a list of the menus for the three classes, much less the recipes, but here are two that are relatively simple:

CHICKEN IN LETTUCE LEAVES

To Serve 6 to 8

2 cups finely chopped onion.
½ cup finely chopped green pepper.
6 tablespoons butter.
1 1/2 lbs. chicken pieces.
1/2 teaspoon salt, or to taste.
1/2 teaspoon ground bay leaves.
1/2 teaspoon dry mustard.
1/2 cup sherry.

In a heavy skillet, saute chopped onion in 3 tablespoons of butter until tender but not brown. Add chicken pieces and saute briefly. Add remaining butter and saute for a few minutes. Add remaining ingredients and simmer until tender.

SAUERKRAUT SALAD

Wash a package of sauerkraut very well. Drain thoroughly. Toss with a French dressing of oil, vinegar, salt, pepper and a touch of Dijon mustard; a little chopped onion, and chopped fresh dill or dill weed.

This is an excellent accompaniment from baked or poached fish, served hot or cold, to picnic hot dogs.