

Oh, Waiter!

Five weeks ago I bought a gas burner, a silver pot, and a black wok. Opened up my own private restaurant. It's a real cozy little place. "Quaint" you might say—except that word makes me squirm.

The setting is a bungalow verandah under the canopy of coconut palms astride Maenam Bay. It's a small restaurant—one table, two chairs. The name of the joint is "Joe's," and my name isn't. I'm the proprietor, chief purveyor, *maitre 'd*, the chef, waiter, busboy, dishwasher, and so far the only customer.

I like it. I like the whole set-up. Never have to wait for a table. Never any obnoxious asshole yelling into a cellular phone. The food isn't bad and it's been getting better. It's cheap. The service is fine, and there are no taxes, tips, or ties required.

Yes sir, it's getting to be my favorite caravansary. Sure as hell can't complain about the clientele. Classy place.

We serve up oatmeal with honey and shredded coconut for breakfast. (Hard to go wrong there.) Lunch is usually a three-egg omelet with onions, garlic, and fried tofu, or Italian pasta with onions, garlic, and green coconut- milk curry. Dinner is usually whichever one of the two usual lunch items we didn't serve for lunch.

Midway into the fourth week following its inception, Joe's held a staff meeting. It was decided that the restaurant should begin to expand its dinnertime bill of fare. Coconut curry with chicken was the first new *entrée*, and the first real adventure for me in my role as chief purveyor.

Like many people on the island, Joe's does not yet possess a refrigerator. Perishable foods are stored in buckets or boxes of ice. When the ice melts, the food perishes—and in hot tropical climates ice melts pretty damn fast. Consequently, we all go to the market nearly every day to buy fresh, perishable food that hasn't perished yet.

The market generally opens around five in the morning, and by seven most of the ice has melted. The food, however, is a good deal fresher to start with than you'll likely find in a modern air-conditioned supermarket.

The plucked chickens are hanging from hooks, and their throats were cut only an hour or two before going on sale. In some markets, they'll cut the chicken's throat while you wait.

That's fresh chicken.

Being so-called "free range" fowl that Western health food fanatics are so fond of, but seldom ever eat, means that these little darlings might well have been rummaging through your garbage pit only yesterday.

In other words, you may have been eating bits and pieces of the same meal for a long time. Sort of like what the Spanish have been doing with Sherry for hundreds of years.

The vast variety of seafood is also fresh. Swimming around minding their own business a few hours earlier, suddenly the fish are all screaming, "The sea is rising! The sea is rising!"

Of course, the sea wasn't rising for the fish any more than the sky was falling for that silly chicken. What was rising was a fisherman's net, and then, lo and behold, the fish are on the deck of a longtail boat flopping about like fish out of water. Some of them are packed in ice, and others are put in pails of water. You can buy them dead or alive.

So far, you may be thinking these open-air markets should be closer to home. Maybe you'd like one in your neighborhood. Well that's because you ain't seen the flies. They're all over the fresh dead flesh. You ain't seen the rats scurrying along the open drainage system. You ain't seen the scurvy dog gnawing on a buffalo bone, and you for sure ain't seen the blood and guts of various animal kingdom creatures splattered all over every which-a-way.

The best advice when shopping at one of these markets is to get there early, get your grub, and get out. Go home, wash all the fresh meat with clean water and a little vinegar, pack it in ice, knock back a shot of whiskey, and pray you're hungry before the ice melts.

Having said all that, my coconut curry with chicken was very tasty.

The following *entrée* adventure was fish....

Determining the quality of a fish requires some savvy. First, you check the eyes. If they're hazy and bloodshot—like your eyes look after an all night whiskey binge—then move along to another one. The eyes should be clear and bright. Secondly, lift up one of the gills and note the color of the respiratory tissue. It should be bright red. Otherwise, the fish has either been lying around dead for too long, or it was a heavy smoker. Now, some unscrupulous fishmongers resort to artificially coloring the eyes and respiratory tissue in order to deceive customers. So, lastly, take a good whiff of the fish....

If the next thing you remember is a crowd standing around looking down at you, then "pick yourself up, brush yourself off, and start all over again."

All right. Let's say you've found your fish. It's fresh and in a bucket of ice ready to heat and serve.

Well no, not quite....

A fish needs extra preparation before you can cook it. To begin with you've got to clean the fellow. Assuming you haven't been called upon to perform any autopsies in your life, this cleaning process could make you a tad squeamish....

Take a knife and scrape the scales off the skin. That's easy. Then stick your finger under the gill and tear out the tissue. Pick up the knife again and make an incision from one of the gills down across the belly about halfway to the tail. Open up the fish along this incision, remove the intestines and whatever other pukey-looking stuff may be inside.

Try not to puke yourself

If it's a really big fish like a shark, for example, you might also manage to get some of your Christmas shopping done during this procedure.

Cut off the side fins. Wash it thoroughly with fresh water and a splash of vinegar. Finally, cut several intersecting incisions on both sides of the fish. This ensures that the flesh is cooked inside and out.

Now, at this point, if you've still got an appetite, or you haven't ordered out for a pizza, then you can begin to cook your dinner. This is the way we do it at Joe's....

First off, the bartender pours a stiff scotch on the rocks for the proprietor. Then the chef starts to work. Take the wok off the wall and fetch a paper plate. Grab an onion and a bulb of garlic. Leak a half-inch of olive oil into the wok, turn and face the gas burner. It looks like a bomb of World War II vintage.

Bartender pours a stiff scotch on the rocks for the chef.

When it comes to setting fire to the bomb, the chef wishes he had an assistant, but he's happy enough with the scotch.

Bombs away . . . it's lit.

No explosion. Phew!

Place the wok on the bomb, heat the oil for approximately thirty seconds, and gingerly lay the fish inside. Skin the onions and garlic and then dice them. Fry the fish for five minutes on one side, turn it over, add the diced onions and garlic, and fry for five more minutes.

During this time the waiter has mixed a salad, buttered two slices of whole wheat bread, seated the customer, and brought him a cool stiff scotch on the rocks.

It's a lovely evening. There's a gentle breeze waltzing with the palms, a half-ass moon is playing peek-a-boo in the clouds, the Milky Way is all asparkle, and the bay is as quiet and still as a saint meditating upon the glory of God.

Boy, that's good scotch.

The customer disappears for a moment. Probably went to the toilet. In his absence, the chef scoops the fish out of the wok, puts it on a plate,

and into the hands of the waiter who places it on the table and lights a candle.

The customer returns with an anthology of poetry and settles down to enjoy the meal....

That's the way it is at Joe's. Stop by sometime . . . especially if you're female, fresh, good looking, warm blooded, and like scotch on the rocks. We'll cook you up something tasty.

Just remember . . . it's a small restaurant. A table and two chairs. I sit in one of them.