

FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT



A LEGEND'S LETTERS

LEARNING RESTAURANT CONSULTANT CLARK WOLF ENTRUSTS A COLLECTION OF JAMES BEARD'S PAPERS TO NEW YORK UNIVERSITY.

For more than a dozen years, the lively and hospitable Emily Gilder was personal assistant to the legendary James Beard. Sitting just across from Beard on the lower floor of his Greenwich Village town house, she sorted his mail, arranged his appointments, and tried to manage his commitments and his often challenging checkbook.

During the last decade of Beard's life, she carefully and discreetly fished letters, articles, photos, first drafts, and other historically significant dross from the trash basket between their seats. In 1986 she entrusted this memorable cache to me, eliciting my promise to "do the right thing with it, when the time comes."

Over the past few months I've placed every scrap in the capable hands of Marvin Taylor, head curator of New York University's Fales Rare Book Library. Following are some brief examples from the ongoing intimate correspondence Beard maintained with many friends throughout his life.

As early as 1965, from her home in London, author Elizabeth David wrote in amused desperation, "Honestly, what *am* I doing setting up to write cookery books when all I want nowadays is a plate of oat cake and butter, or a few olives and a piece of white cheese—how can I expand those things into two books????"

But by 1974 she was much cheered: "Fortnum's van rolled up yesterday, delivering your princely gift of champagne—intended I realize for Christmas, but just in time for St. Valentine's." And later that year, after a happy trip to Normandy, she wrote, "I was much amused by the reaction of one or two French women to whom I mentioned baking bread at home. 'Ah non, pas possible—le pain, chez soi? Quelle idée—etc.'—which was what I expected."

With M.F.K. Fisher the chat may have been more personally revealing, if less reflective. On July 11, 1978, "Mary Frances" wrote from her house on the Bouverie Ranch, near the town of Glen Ellen, California, "Last night a drop-out friend suddenly appeared with some fresh mussels, and I got rid of him fairly neatly and then ate them by myself! They were delicious (your basic recipe for *à la marinère*, and I drank most of the soup...), and today I plan to eat them cold for lunch, probably unadorned although I suppose for guests they could/should be masked in something, hot or cold???"

Magisterially, she goes on to pronounce, "I've been looking at the

proofs of Michael Field's book, and I think it is good. I seldom say this. The recipes are merely illustrative. (The menus are fairly dreadful!) But the descriptions of technique are clear and usually excellent."

With childhood friend Mary Hamblet the conversation was local and timely: Who was at dinner, who lost a "bossom" to cancer, how this week's club meeting compared with last—all tumbled together like back fence gossip.

After Beard's death, Hamblet wrote from Oregon to Gilder, discussing his final resting place almost in the same breath with a comment on the happy state of a friend's blossoming career: "Jerry Lamb & I took J's ashes to the beach—& deposited them in two of his favorite spots—in the Pacific!"

Lodged at the Gritti Palace in Venice, Beard took pen to house stationery to express budgetary concerns to Gilder: "I feel this trip is going to cost 2,000 dollars before we are home. Is that alright? If so, telex yes or no when the other message comes in. If so, you will have to send me a money transfer to Simca's [Simone Beck, a co-author with Julia Child of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*], but I'll let you know when and how."

In a report during the same sojourn of a visit by members of the Lianides family, owners of the Coach House, a venerated American restaurant (its site now home to **Babbo**) where he often entertained at small dinners, Beard closed rather wistfully, "It's been warm and lovely here—not much to do but walk and stare at people—but then one can't have everything."

But, on September 22, 1975, Fisher wrote, "It was so good to talk to you yesterday, dear Jim! Thank you for calling. I'm sorry you misbehaved in Venice, but you know how to follow your chosen pattern, and there's nothing the rest of us can do about you except flap our hands helplessly now and then." Apparently, thanks to the phone system, not all confidences found their way into the Gilder circular file.

Clark Wolf, a New York City-based restaurant consultant, will host a reading of excerpts from the Beard Papers on Tuesday, October 21, at the Fales Rare Book Library. Photographs and some of the original letters will be on display to celebrate the collection in this, Beard's 100th birthday year. For info: (212) 998-2596.



Above: Beard with his indispensable right hand, Clay Triplette. Top: Beard (seated, left) with "shining lights" friends.