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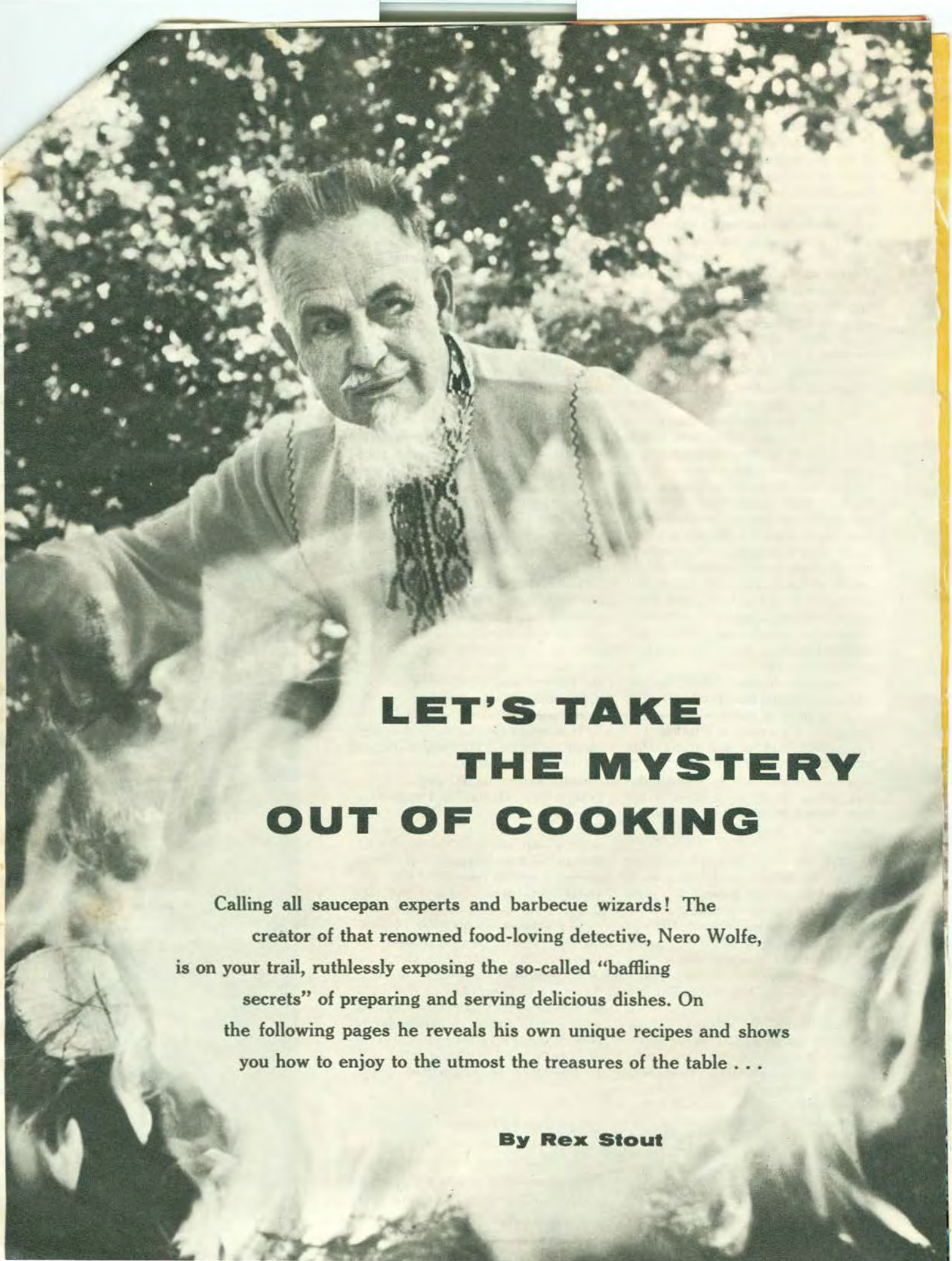


LET'S TAKE THE MYSTERY OUT OF COOKING

Calling all saucepan experts and barbecue wizards! The creator of that renowned food-loving detective, Nero Wolfe, is on your trail, ruthlessly exposing the so-called "baffling secrets" of preparing and serving delicious dishes. On the following pages he reveals his own unique recipes and shows you how to enjoy to the utmost the treasures of the table . . .

By Rex Stout

A MYSTERY is always a challenge, all the way from the profound mystery of the meaning and purpose of life on down to the trivial mystery of why some people murder the delicate flavor of a fresh raw oyster by dousing it with horseradish and ketchup. I have never solved that puzzle, although I have solved quite a few connected with cooking and eating. It may be that people who put horseradish instead of a squeeze of fresh lemon juice on oysters are following the example of a man I heard about at a weekend party. On the terrace, after dinner, highballs were being served, and one was offered to a gray-haired widow. She didn't take it. "I don't like whisky," she said. A pause. "My husband didn't like whisky." A pause. "He only drank whisky when he was eating fish." A pause. "He didn't like fish."

Like myself, you must have met scores of people—otherwise reasonable and intelligent men and women—who insist on making the deepest mystery out of what is actually the simplest operation in the world—the cooking and serving of appetizing food. Although I sincerely hope not, at least one of these mystery-making characters may be a member of your own household—otherwise surely a neighbor, acquaintance, or intimate friend.

There's the familiar fellow, for example, who would have you believe he's the only man in the world who can properly carve a roast or a turkey. For your benefit, and for that of the other guests who would much rather get on with the eating than sit through his play acting, he stages a performance more suited to the operating amphitheatre of a great metropolitan hospital.

"May we begin now, please?" we wonder, as the succulent fumes assail our nostrils. By no means! We must wait, interminably, while the great surgeon rises, selects his implements, tucks his sterile napkin in place, vigorously yet deliberately sharpens his scalpel, studiously surveys the carcass before him, and at long last makes the first incision.

Then there's the woman—usually charming and usually, alas, some unfortunate's wife—who flies into a tempestuous tizzy whenever "company" drops in unexpectedly at mealtime. Whether such visitors consist of a couple of casual country cousins on a free-loading cross-country auto vacation, or a score of hubby's convivial fellow workers returning from the annual company picnic, the wife in the case puts on an emotional scene that would rival anything in "Camille." After hours of frantic rushing back and forth and round and round in the kitchen, she finally produces a "meal" better suited to the tastes and habits of farmyard animals than to guests who walk upright on two legs.

Just as food is a favorite between-crimes hobby of my favorite man of mystery, "Nero Wolfe," so has the study of those who create phony mysteries in the kitchen long fascinated me.

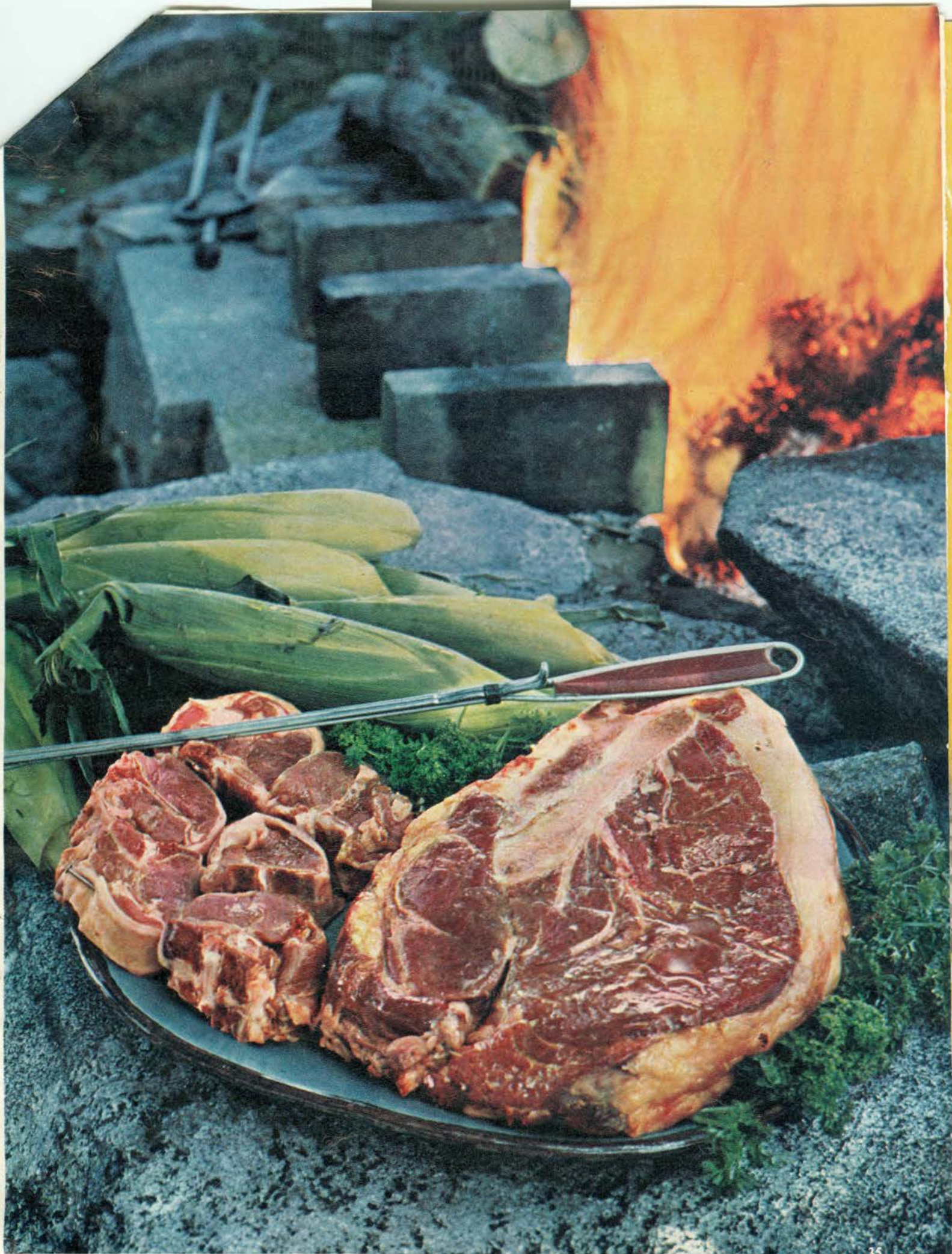
When I first undertook to solve a culinary mystery half a century ago in a boarding house in Burlington, Vermont, I ran into a baffling one. I'll never forget it because the landlady, Mrs. Vail, prepared baked beans which were the best I had ever tasted—or have tasted since—and I decided to find out why. By exhaustive interrogation and surveillance, I learned she boasted no secret ingredient, or selection of ingredients; she used the same materials as everyone else, and in the same proportions. I had to go deeper, and I did. It was just her. She was an artist. Knowing that all beans are not alike, she soaked each batch, not a certain number of hours, but until they looked and felt right. She tried to tell me what "right" was, but somehow she couldn't. Every detail of the whole process was determined not by rule, but by some inner calculation. Sometimes she left the oven door open a crack for the last two hours, and sometimes she didn't, and when I asked her why, she would only say, "It's the smell."

That taught me that the real mysteries of cooking are the same as the real mysteries of any other human performance—the same as the mystery of a great actor's "Hamlet" as compared to a merely adequate actor's "Hamlet." The ingredients—the words and the scenery—are identical, but oh, the difference! Such real mysteries—and there are not many of them—are insoluble, and I don't pretend that I can take them out of cooking or anything else.

So it's the phony mysteries of cooking that interest me—and there are thousands of these, all nothing but bugaboos. Take popovers, for one. There is a widespread belief that a pan of delicious fluffy popovers that will melt in your mouth can be produced only by a prestidigitator after years of practice, but I'll bet I can make your 10-year-old daughter a wizard at it in

Ingredients for the oldest hocus-pocus in the history of cooking—the barbecue! Ever since the caveman, says Rex Stout, amateur chefs have been making a cryptic ceremony of outdoor grilling. Actually, steaks and chops are a cinch—and so is corn on the cob, when you roast it beside the coals

PHOTOS BY MAXWELL COPLAN



an hour. Nothing but eggs, milk, flour, and salt, and making the batter is easier than making a mud pie. Then (and this is the whole "mystery") dump it into an electric food blender for a 20-second spin before you pour it into hot, well-greased muffin pans. Once, before witnesses, including my wife, a beautiful young woman gave me a thorough kiss in appreciation of my popovers, but I had no right to it. I should have told her to go to the kitchen and kiss the electric blender.

I know a woman whose reputation as a hostess worth cultivating is based solely on Lyonnaise potatoes. It is true that this is one of the three tastiest ways to prepare that marvelous tuber; and she knows that (a) the potatoes must be boiled in their skins, just barely done, the day before, (b) that they must be sliced very thin, not diced, and (c) that fresh beef drippings are better than butter. But everybody knows those things, or should. Her authentic prowess is not as a cook but as a mechanic, or perhaps I should say a juggler. Like most good dishes, Lyonnaise potatoes should please the eye as well as the palate. Hers come to the table an intact golden brown disk, twelve inches across, on a hot silver platter the shape of the full moon. Her "secret weapon" is a thin circular aluminum disc the exact size and shape of the bottom of her largest heavy skillet. It cost her 90 cents, and has brought her at least a thousand dollars' worth of glory.

"I can make your ten-year-old daughter a wizard at producing fluffy, delicious popovers in an hour," boasts the author, as he whips up a batch of batter

A neighbor of mine named Bill—no, I guess not. Call him Leicester. I'll keep this factual except the names, which I shall improvise, not to be mysterious, but to keep from losing friends. Leicester went the Lyonnaise lady one better, winning fame without blowing even 90 cents. He did it with a word. At a garden party at his place last summer, a woman told him it was the best tossed salad she had ever eaten and asked if he had made it himself. "Oh, sure," he told her. "It's because I don't toss it, I churn it." He is now widely known as the originator of churned salad. He claims that he made his own churn, of apple wood, but refuses to let anyone see it, saying that he must "perfect" it first. I am all for him, since his tossing in the word "churn" that summer day was a justified reaction to the silliness of the term "tossed salad." All it means is that the dressing has been mixed with the greens before serving, and if Leicester wants to pretend that he does it with an invisible churn, at least he contributes a touch of gay invention, which is more than I can say for certain people I know, both male and female, who turn the simple wedding of the greens and the dressing into a baffling mumbo jumbo, or try to.

I think I'll skip the salad dressing, since this is a family magazine. I might use words. Too often, much too often, have I seen a group of my fellow beings sit and gaze fixedly at the host as he or she added to the mixture in the bowl four drops of grenadine or, with a spatula, a gob of something like mashed lobster. (Tossing or churning to follow.) You probably won't believe this, but it's true: I once saw a man throw away a whole batch and start over again because he had put in seven tablespoons of sour cream instead of six (for a grapefruit salad). In fact, with salad dressing the only valid rule is: everyone to his taste. You can try anything from capers to curry, but for heaven's sake don't pretend there's any mystery about it.

Some phony culinary mysteries are epidemic, whereas others may be foisted by a single person and never spread. A perfect example of the second kind is one perpetrated by my friend Tremayne. I have seen him pull it several times in the three years I have known him, and it gives him so much innocent pleasure that I hope none of his other friends will read this. When, at a summer meal at his place in the country, corn on the cob is served, he brings it in himself, in an asbestos-lined basket covered with a cloth. After it has been passed, buttered, salted, and attacked, any guest who has never been there before is sure to say, "Tremayne, this is by far the best corn I have ever eaten. What have you done to it?" Tremayne smiles and says, "It's too long a story, Waldemar. The process begins in May, when I plant the seed, and continues up to the moment when I put the ears in the basket and carry them in to you. It would bore you. Just enjoy it."

Absolutely true. The process did begin with the May planting, unless you want to go back thousands of years to the first maize kernel in the long drama of evolution. And what Waldemar said was equally true; it was indeed the best corn he had ever eaten, beyond comparison, simply because it had been cooked the way it should be, the way it was always cooked on the Kansas farm where I spent my boyhood. It had been roasted in the husk, minutes after it was plucked from the stalks. In Kansas it was roasted in the oven of the kitchen stove, which burned coal. Tremayne roasts his in the oven of his big gas range. Either is adequate, but I like it best roasted at the edges of the bed of coals in my outdoor grill, because by proper watching and turning the heat can be allowed to blacken the outer husk layers and reach in enough to char the kernels to a delicate brown. Very likely that was the way a Red Indian first ate it, and it remains the best way to apply heat to America's finest contribution to the human menu.

If anyone objects that I am myself trying to make a mystery of something generally known, I say no. Tremayne has been getting away with his legpull for three years now. Each summer for many years I have eaten corn on the cob at the homes of a large assortment of friends and acquaintances, and invariably the texture of the kernels and their rich inimitable flavor have been vitiated by contact with boiling water. I haven't found a single restaurant in New York City with enough gumption to serve roasting ears, which is what we called them in Kansas. I doubt if there is one in the United States.

We can stay at the outdoor grill for a prime example of the other kind of bogus mystery, the epidemic. Its perpetrators are almost exclusively males. Many of them dress up for it, with a white starched Leaning Tower of Pisa perched on their dome and a fancy apron enveloping their frame, but I don't object to that. The more men dress up the better, if for nothing else as a sign of revolt against the waiter's-undertaker's uniforms they wear after sundown as backdrop for women's finery. A neighbor of mine has a dazzling green and yellow striped jacket which he puts on only when playing croquet.

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to our mutton—or rather, our beef. There he stands, and what has he got? A bed of coals, a framed network of wires or rods, a two-inch slab of sirloin, and a facial expression that is a combination of Mona Lisa, the Great Sphinx, and the Delphian sibyl. What is he going to do? Precisely what a caveman did 20,000 years ago; put the meat close enough to the coals, and keep it there long enough, to get it ready to eat. Why does he look so concentrated and intense and portentous and cryptic? I don't know; the caveman didn't. Or wait a minute, now—by golly, maybe he did! This may be the oldest hocus-pocus in the history of cuisine. If so, we'll have to give it the respect due to any relic of antiquity—but it's still a fake.

And so is my friend Montmorency. One Friday night he said to a little group of week-enders at his house, "You lucky stiffs can turn over and go to sleep again in the morning, but not me. Since you insist on having some of my Eggs Solitaire for breakfast, I'll have to roll out early and start to work." Five guests (not me and of course not his wife) looked at him much as if he were Beethoven and had said he would have to get up early to compose the Pastoral Symphony.

TEN hours later, eating his "Eggs Solitaire," as he called them, two or three apiece in little casseroles, their praise was somewhat extravagant, and so was their appreciation of his sacrifice of repose in their behalf. I just ate the eggs, which were okay, for I knew what he had done. He had put 22 little casseroles on an oven tray, poured cream in them, plopped in the eggs, added to each a drop or two of soy sauce, a dash of Tabasco, and a few other fanciful touches, and stuck the tray in the oven. I admit he had had to roll out early—but only if he had to milk the cows and separate the cream.

Another friend, Hepzibeth, makes an excellent, standard hollandaise sauce, only she insists on calling it Cedar Sauce. By what experimental processes she got to cedar, I don't know. Anyhow, she keeps on hand a supply of cedar sticks one inch wide, one foot long, and rounded at the ends, made to her special order, and uses a fresh one each time for stirring. Since she also uses fresh eggs, and doesn't let the water in the double boiler boil, and never stops stirring even if her nose itches, her sauce is fair enough except for a slight tang of cedar, which is only mildly objectionable. I admit she gave me an idea. I have tried stirring hollandaise with various blunt instruments, and with sticks of celery it's pretty good, though of course you have to discard the celery.

Speaking of sauces, still another friend, Amarantha, was once carried completely away by her passion for culinary mysteries. Her chief pet is sauce bearnaise, as indeed it deserves to be, since there is no finer sauce on earth. It is a simple and easy sauce too, a mere matter of fifteen or twenty minutes if you have a good stirring wrist, with only two problems to solve: finding the fresh herb called tarragon and digging up enough dough for scads of butter. But Amarantha makes a stupendous production of it, transforming the kitchen into a chaotic clutter. During the operation her concentration is intense. On this memorable occasion I was in the living room with her husband and the other guests, enjoying cocktails and appetizers, when Amarantha appeared in the doorway, dishevelled and triumphant, and called, "All right, my dears, come and get it!" Then she clapped her palm to her brow: "Wait! My God, I forgot to cook the meat!"

Or take Diana and her prune whip. One day when she served it for dessert a guest said it was so luscious there *must* be something special about it. Diana said only one thing really special—she always put in a little citroderma. Of course everyone at the table wanted to know what citroderma was and where they could get some.

Diana smiled and shook her head. "My dear people," she said, "if I told you where to get it, you wouldn't come here for it!"

There were seven guests there besides me. I don't know to how many of them it occurred that "citron" is French for "lemon" and "derma" is the layer of the skin beneath the epidermis; as for me, I recognized that a hostess has rights as well as duties. I merely wondered, between luscious spoonfuls, whether she had actually scraped the yellow epidermis from the lemon peel before grating it.

Cytherea and her rice pudding. She doesn't try to make a mystery of it; quite the contrary. You don't have to ask what gives that exotic flavor to her rice pudding; indeed, you don't get a chance to; she tells you. Hickory nuts. The woman is nutty about hickory nuts. Certainly people may be, and often are, nutty about much less deserving objects, but one result of her particular nuttiness is that a bowl of rice pudding at her table must cost around eight dollars. She pays her cook some two dollars an hour, and it takes the cook a good three hours to get enough hickory-nut kernels from their formidable fortresses to make the dish. Add to that the cost of the nuts, which are hard to come by in her part of the country, and there you are. I say it's for the squirrels. Blanched almonds will do for me.

Only people with tough and steady nerves should go to Guinevere's house for lunch, because you are apt to be in the middle of your best story and just starting your second Martini when the siren sounds: "The *soufflé!* Coming! Quick! *Quick!*" And you have to run for the table like a deer. Now, no one denies that a good cheese *soufflé* is a worthy dish, but it's not worth a nervous breakdown.

TWO women and one man of my acquaintance similarly make a great-to-do about Crepes Suzette, which are of course a fine show-off number. But why all the buildup and bother? Their fancy French pancakes are okay but nothing special, and as for the sauce and the flame, the only real difficulty is the cost of the liqueur and the brandy, and the problem of lighting it without setting yourself and your house on fire.

I suppose all such mystery-makers have fun, and that the temptation is often great, since not much harm is done. There was an occasion some years ago when I found doing a bit of

AN AMERICAN MAGAZINE CARTOON BY FRED R. LUNDY

faking myself irresistible. At a public luncheon in a restaurant I was seated across the table from a literary critic and his wife, and she remarked to him that the lamb chops were exceptionally good and wondered why. He said he didn't know why, but no doubt Rex Stout could tell her, adding, "Of course there's nothing about food that Stout doesn't know. Tell her why the chops are good, Stout."

I didn't like his tone, and I hadn't liked a piece he had written about detective stories. So I said: "Well, they were well selected and well cooked, and of course they're sinisters."

"What do you mean, sinisters?"

"Sinister in its basic sense as opposed to dexter. Meaning 'left' or 'left side.' When lambs lie down they always lie on the right side, and that makes the meat on that side tougher and stringier. So people who know meat buy lamb chops that come from the left side. Butchers call them sinisters."

He was a bit suspicious but, having started, I had to make good, and I did. I learned later that he got into an argument with a butcher that nearly came to blows. So who am I to reproach my peers for being mysterious about cooking?

But I can't help preferring people who simply go quietly about the business of turning out good food without making a hullabaloo. They linger in my affections long after many a phony is forgotten. I still recall with undiminished pleasure the estimable Mrs. Vail of Vermont, and her incomparable baked beans. One of my current favorites is a resourceful but extraordinarily modest chap who was home alone one Saturday noon—his wife, a noted neighborhood cook, being away on a trip—when three obviously hungry morning strollers, myself included, dropped in. Was he the least bit flustered or perturbed? Did he frantically call the nearest sandwich counter, "Chili Bowl," or caterer? Did he offer us paper plates of salami and sardines on stale soda-crackers, washed down with tepid soda-pop?

Indeed, he did not. Casually, after fixing our iced drinks, he wandered away to the kitchen. I drifted to the terrace, where I could spy through the window. As I watched, he found on a shelf a couple of big cans of pre-fabricated chicken à la King, "ready to heat and serve," or so the label says. I twinged inwardly as he opened the cans, dumped their contents in a stewpan, and set it on the stove. When it was warm enough to taste, he did so; then made an expression of distaste. Hunting further, he found a few shrimps, some mushrooms, a rack of herbs. Into the stew they went. He tasted again. This time, his expression said: "Better, but still not good enough." He uncovered more seasoning, a few onions . . . and then his eyes lighted up. From the liqueur closet he drew forth a bottle of white wine, and stirred a bit of it carefully into the pan. This time, when he tasted, his face told me that all was well. I tiptoed back to my seat with the others, and in a jiffy we were eating a luncheon dish no gourmet could ever criticize.

In fact, the food proved so sensational that my friends besieged him for his "terrific recipe." To this day, they refuse to believe his protestation that he'd whipped the whole thing up out of his head on the spur of the moment. And they went home a little vexed with him because he would not share with them his mysterious "secret." But I have ever since held him in the highest esteem, as a man of sufficient character to refuse to concoct another culinary mystery and perpetrate another phony cooking fraud. Such a person, when you come across one, whether man or woman, is worth taking to your heart, both as an example you can look up to, and as a culinary companion with whom you can enjoy the true treasures of the table.

THE END ★★