



Edgar Weinrott enjoying his 19th meal at A la Maison, with general manager Lori Sexton.

JOHN COSTELLO / Staff Photographer

A discerning diner who deserves ★★★★★

By April White
FOR THE INQUIRER

When Edgar Weinrott turned 88 last fall, a few of his dearest friends threw him a little dinner party.

The esteemed Peter Gilmore of Gilmore's in West Chester closed his own restaurant to whip up a decadent seafood dish, "Scallops Sylvia," in tribute to Weinrott's late wife.

Talula's Table in Kennett Square — one of the toughest

reservations in America — went dark as well: Owner Bryan Sikora drove to the Philadelphia party to serve Weinrott his fragrant pumpkin and duck consomme.

Thomas Keller, perhaps the country's most admired chef, couldn't make it. But he sent along a taped video message, and then phoned not once, but *twice* from the kitchen of his celebrated French Laundry in California's Napa Valley.

See **WEINROTT** on F6



Ed Weinrott (in center, wearing medal) at the dinner in his honor, with a few of his chef friends: (from left) Lil Lacassagne of Saint-Jacques in Raleigh, N.C.; Peter Gilmore of Gilmore's; Andrew Deery of Majolica; Abde Dahrouch of Pond; Daniel Stern of Rae and Gayle; Doug Runyen and Larry Kliamovich, both of Fayette Street Grille; and Brian Sikora of Talula's Table.

Discerning diner, friend of top chefs

WEINROTT from F1

And those were just a few of the culinary luminaries who gathered to applaud the Bala Cynwyd accountant, one of the most dedicated, joyful and tireless diners in Philly. "I used to kid people," he would say (over dinner, of course) later, "that I only ate out seven or eight nights a week."

Ed and Sylvia's love of food — and the chefs, waitstaff and fellow diners they befriended through their meals — began humbly enough. The pair met on a blind date in 1946. During their courtship, Sylvia introduced Ed to fresh figs and fresh chestnuts. He acquainted her with oysters, a staple of Weinrott Sunday dinners at Doc's Oyster House in Atlantic City.

They married eight months after they met, and their mutual interest in food became, in his understated words, "a hobby." Sylvia became an adventurous and accomplished cook: "She cooked in four languages! We had six to eight dinner parties a year!" he reminisced. "I never cared. I was always invited."

After their two sons went away to college, the couple booked their first trip to Europe, nine days — through Britain, the Netherlands, and France — paid for on an installment plan in 1968. They ate at their first Michelin-starred restaurants on that trip — Tour D'Argent and Paul Bocuse, an extravagance for the budget of the Bala Cynwyd couple. They went to lunch at Tour D'Argent to save money, but it was still six courses over six hours, like nothing they had ever experienced in 1960s Philadelphia. They pledged to return to experience more restaurants that had earned the Michelin stars.

And they did, the following year and the year after that and the one after that. "In 1973, we wanted to go on a dining tour of France, and the travel agents couldn't find one. So, we thought, we'll make one."

They advertised in Gourmet magazine and journeyed with another couple in 1974; then they led a group of 14 in 1975: "Seven days — one two-star; six three-star restaurants," Weinrott said. "It was quite a week."

Over the years, they developed their own 20-point rating system. "It was not as a matter of whim," he explained. "We wanted to remember which places we loved the

Weinrott calculates that he and his late wife, Sylvia, made 27 trips to France over 16 years — "for the purpose of dining."

Ed Weinrott with general manager Lori Sexton at A la Maison. His list of Philadelphia-area favorite restaurants is ever changing.

JOHN COSTELLO
Staff Photographer



most."

They wrote to the Michelin Guide with their findings and once even earned an audience with its editors.

Sylvia attended a weeklong course at a French cooking school one year, and another a few years later. Then she decided she wanted to work in the kitchen of a three-star restaurant. "I always said yes to her, whatever she wanted to do," he said. "I never regretted it."

The two of them, speaking just enough French to get by, prepped in the legendary La Maison Troisgros in Roanne. "We worked there for three days. I didn't have the faintest idea what I was doing," Weinrott said. He remembers cleaning crayfish, shredding his fingers on the shells. "It was a great experience, not for the cooking, but to see the operation — so smooth, so well organized — and the butter! A scoop of butter was added to everything."

Ever the accountant he has been since 1945, Weinrott calculates that he and Sylvia made 27 trips to France over 16 years — "for the purpose of dining; sightseeing was not primary," he said. They logged more than 75,000 miles and 300 two- and three-star meals. What's harder to count are the friendships: Paul Bocuse, Alain Chapel, Jean

and Pierre Troisgros, Jean-Louis Palladin, a who's who of France's celebrity chefs, long before the concept existed.

"We knew everyone," he said. "Because we were interested, we asked questions."

Every time the Weinrotts appreciated a dish, they made a point of asking to speak with the chef. "We were not trying to get recipes. We just wanted to tell him how much we enjoyed the meal."

An appetizer prepared by renowned chef Frédy Girardet in Switzerland "just blew us away" — six different kinds of fish, each in its own sauce, on its own plate, he said. After sending a rave to the chef, they were invited to join him in the reception area.

"In our broken French, we went through the entire meal, talked about each dish. You could tell he was thrilled."

Thus their credo: "If you think the food is good, it's not sufficient to tell each other, *tell the chef!* They knock themselves out trying to please you, and they get very little feedback."

Ed and Sylvia met Jean-Louis Palladin, the youngest chef ever to earn two Michelin stars, at La Table des Cordeliers in Condom, France,

in 1977. But when they returned, Palladin had moved on. Eventually, they found him at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, where he had opened Jean-Louis. Now, instead of flying to France, they drove to dinner at Jean-Louis, 143 times, often dining with the noted chef. They followed Palladin's proteges, like Jimmy Sneed, around the country and, of course, they explored Philadelphia's burgeoning restaurant scene, looking for new favorites closer to home.

After Sylvia was diagnosed with a degenerative disease similar to Alzheimer's, Ed continued to take his wife on the culinary adventures they both loved. Sylvia died 10 years ago, but Ed still pursues their hobby, dining with friends they made over the years. "I wish Sylvia could have dined at some of these restaurants," he said of his current list of favorites, his A-list. "It saddens me," he wrote in his remembrances of his wife, "that the fourth chair is vacant."

There wasn't a single chair empty at his birthday party, as decades of his dining companions gathered: Susan and Bill Hauser, whom they met at a Book and the Cook dinner at Tony Clark's a decade ago. Joe Whyte, who had worked for — and

Ed Weinrott's A-List

Ed Weinrott has an ever-changing list of his top spots in the Philadelphia region.

"I never listen to food critics unless I know their tastes match my own," he said. "Food is subjective."

Friends who have eaten at all 12 restaurants — whether they give a positive review or a negative one — are presented with a diploma from Ed.

Here is his list:

A la Maison, Ardmore
Augusto's, Warminster
Catherine's, Unionville
Fayette Street Grill, Conshohocken
Gayle, Queen Village
Gilmore's, West Chester
Mainland Inn, Mainland
Majolica, Phoenixville
Nais Cuisine, Havertown
Pond, Radnor
Sagami, Collingswood
Salt & Pepper, Queen Village

eaten with — Weinrott since 1958. And Robin Carr, a pathologist who cared for Sylvia as a hospice volunteer, and his wife, Tamara Brenn, who organized the surprise party, recruiting the chefs and collecting birthday wishes from out-of-town favorites.

The courses kept coming: Abde Dahrouch of Pond Restaurant in Radnor served foie gras terrine. Doug Runyen of Fayette Street Grille in Conshohocken made curried crab cigars. Andrew Deery of Phoenixville's Majolica presented a favorite dish, roasted beet and beef tongue salad. Daniel Stern, who hosted the event at Rae in the Cira Centre (before he closed it), prepared *pintade* (guinea hen) *au vin*.

And the conversation revolved almost entirely around food, fondly remembered meals of France as well as new Philadelphia favorites.

"All you talk about is food," Weinrott recalled a friend's commenting once. "But at my age," he said, "what else can I do three times a day that's this much fun?"