

Our Lady at the Journal



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By SUE BARTON HUFFMAN

"I didn't even know Bart knew how to cook," said my fellow OU J-School graduate who edits this *Sooner Magazine* when she heard I'd been named food and equipment editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*. Truth is, I can. But I don't much anymore.

Sitting in Stewart Harral's public relations courses taking diligent notes on how to deal with striking mineworkers or something equally relevant, I didn't fancy myself as OU's answer to Betty Crocker. As a matter of fact, I'd settled on PR as a major by process of elimination. Ruled out newspapers, because who wanted to do that? Ruled out advertising, because I couldn't draw a straight line with a ruler. Ruled out broadcasting (silly girl) . . . God knows why. Which left PR. The choice of a major was insignificant anyway, since I planned to write the Great American Novel and be instantly and forever famous.

Actually, PR was not, in retrospect, a bad choice. It turned out to be my bread and butter, from my all-important first job at Hallmark Cards in Kansas City, to San Diego where I fast-talked my way into becoming the "Milk Council Girl" at an ad agency, to running my own small business in St. Louis (between freelancing for a large PR firm and changing diapers).

I fell into food just like I seem to fall into everything else in my life. In January of '72, I found myself newly divorced with two kids, ages 3 and 5, whose sole support had landed on my sloping shoulders. The food editor of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* had decided to retire, and I had decided I

was the perfect person to replace her.

Setting out to convince the managing editor of that, I thanked my lucky stars for my *Oklahoma Daily* experience all those years ago. I'd practically lived at that paper, since by then I was tired of living at the sorority house, and nobody could have an apartment in those days unless you could prove you had severe social problems. I blithely assured him he did not want a home economist. This was a job for a journalist.

Of course I could be a food editor. Didn't I own 47 cookbooks? Wasn't my very own mother a home ec. graduate of Oklahoma College of Women? Hadn't she introduced me to cooking at the tender age of 5? (I neglected to add my first culinary masterpiece was Royal chocolate pudding.) Wasn't I the Perle Mesta of Kirkwood, Missouri, entertaining and cooking for up to 50 people? (Notice I did not say effortlessly.) Didn't I whip out my own sourdough bread and croissants and gourmet-this and ethnic-that with the confidence — or foolhardiness — to use my guests as guinea pigs? I got the job.

As hard as the work was, I loved the newspaper. I *was* the food department — did the writing, editing, heads, layout, proof-reading, copy-reading. Answered the phone when it got answered and opened the mail which hardly ever got answered. Found new friends, even had my first post-marriage romance with the religion editor of the paper. Since he happened to be very tall and very skinny, everybody thought maybe I could fatten him up. I never did.

I wrote stories on Spanish olives. In Spain. And Swiss röesti. In Switzerland. Judged the Pillsbury Bake-Off, the Pineapple Cooking Classic in

Hawaii, the National Chicken Cooking Contest. I thought perhaps I would spend my golden years in St. Louis fighting with the printers over typos. Wrong.

One May day in '75 the then-food editor of *Ladies' Home Journal* called. She was moving to San Francisco, and wasn't I interested in applying for her job? I was not. I was not a home economist — as magazine food editors tend to be. I was divorced with two kids 6 and 8, and not only did I not know anybody in New York, I'd only been there three times ever — strictly as Tessie Tourist. Besides, I was very West Coast-oriented and thought maybe I'd move back to California one day.

Finally I agreed to send in a résumé and a few tearsheets. Maybe *LHJ* would fly me to New York and take me out to dinner. But no. The managing editor was touring the provinces, interviewing. We had dinner all right — but in St. Louis. The interview was pure chemistry, and I was flown to New York for more serious discussions. By then, I knew they'd interviewed 47 people and had narrowed it to four. *LHJ* requested a commitment that I would take the position should it be offered. "How hard can it be," I asked myself. If you move to Peoria, you have to find a new place to live, new school and new babysitters. If you move to New York, you still have to find a new place to live, new school and new babysitters. Besides, I could tell my boss at the *Globe* I was almost food editor of *Ladies' Home Journal*, hence he was so fortunate to have me that I should get a raise.

The day I received the truly unexpected phone call from the Journal, my horoscope said "Today you receive

Sue Huffman, center, and LHJ staff analyze recipes for bake sale article.

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Huffman consults LHJ art director Tamara Schneider, left, on the selection of color slides to illustrate an article for the magazine food and equipment section.

an offer you find impossible to refuse." I accepted, then went out and had one of Jimmy Carter's three martini lunches. Without the lunch, I was petrified.

My little no-necks and I moved to the Big Apple and found an apartment with a good public school across the street and a view of the playground. Lower is cheaper, I quickly learned. Mary Poppins never flew in our window, but we managed to make do with various and sundry housekeepers coming and going. And *Ladies' Home Journal* was — and is a ball.

Being the food editor is great for job satisfaction and terrible for the figure. There are test kitchens — five — with a cooking person in each, turning out all sorts of good things. Each woman is assigned a story and proceeds to develop recipes which have to be tasted and analyzed. Prepared again, tasted and analyzed. I'm very picky. If it's a little too soupy or needs the zest of lemon juice, she does it again. Once a recipe is approved and written up, someone else in the kitchen rechecks it — for (sigh) tasting. Which makes our recipes pretty reliable, and our bodies less than svelte. The last thing you want to do in the evenings is to go home and cook. I've gotten to be a past master at throwing something together for the kids — now if I could only learn not to perform a taste test on it . . .

Once all the recipes are approved for a story, the art director and I talk about graphics and select a photographer. We have a food show for the editor-in-chief, art director, photographer and copywriter. We do our own food styling but use a prop stylist to run all over town getting just the

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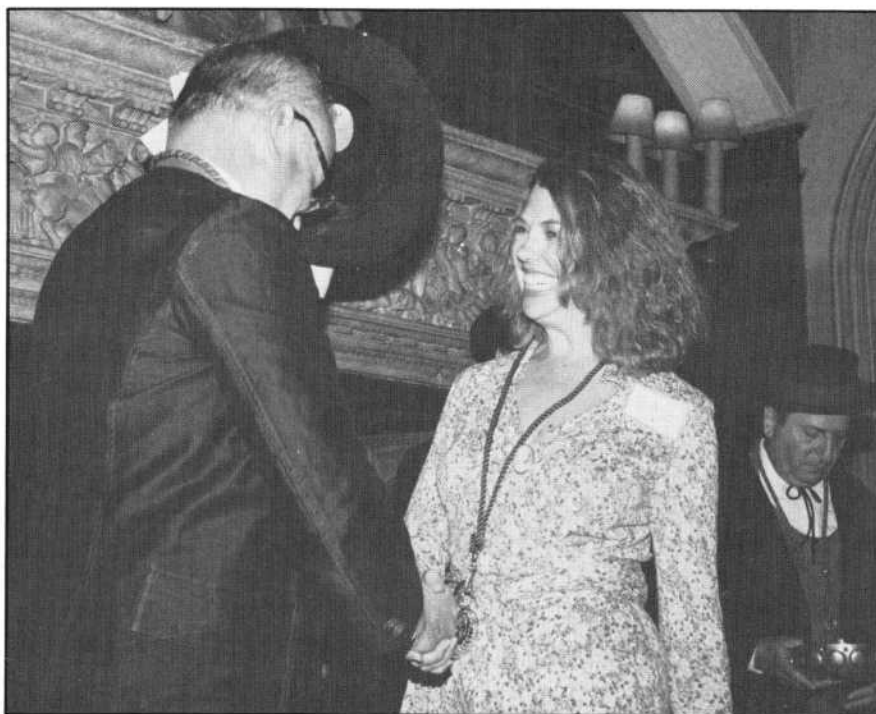
right containers. I look through the camera a lot and suggest that the strawberry on the top of the pie could move a quarter of an inch to the right.

All these years later, I still love my job. I have survived a new art director, new editor-in-chief and new owner. Each, I'm happy to report, has been good for the magazine and, not so incidentally, for me. I've had a myriad of talented people in and out of the test kitchens and a fabulous home economist as my right hand (somebody has to know why the cake fell) who has put up with me for seven years. I travel a fair amount — from glamorous spots like Rio to not-so-glamorous, like Fargo.

As for New York City itself, it's not always been a piece of cake. There was the time Charley was knocked off his new bike and had it stolen out from under him. Ditto the new skateboard. At those times we'd cry together, and I would berate myself for what I'd done to my kids. There are mornings when the rain falls, the wind gusts and the bus never comes. Or someone steals the only available taxi for miles right from under your nose because you haven't learned to be pushy enough.

But New York also is the theatre and Rockefeller Center at Christmas and the deli in our building and the azaleas in front of New York Hospital that I discovered when I started walking to work during a transit strike. The buses returned, but I kept walking. And on a crisp fall day in Central Park, you can't imagine why anyone would ever live anyplace else.

Most of all, there are the restaurants. A friend will call long-distance, "We're coming to New York. Where should we eat?" First you have to de-



A long way from home, Sue B. Huffman is welcomed into the Ordre des Compagnons du Beaujolais (friends of the Beaujolais wine-growing areas of France).

cide what ethnic cuisine to recommend. There's French and Italian to be sure, not to mention steak and seafood. Chinese — Szechuan, Hunan, Cantonese, dim sum. Japanese — steak house or sushi bar. Vietnamese. Thai. Philippine. Cuban. Brazilian. Czech. Hungarian. Austrian. German. Even Mexican, although that's one thing this Okie cooks at home because the Mexican restaurants in the city don't cut it.

And don't forget the food stores, those havens of lascivious gastronomy — Bloomies, Macy's Cellar, Zabar's, Balducci's and the brand new DDL (which had 30,000 customers/lookers/thieves in three

days.) Not to mention carry-out gourmet shops on every block. No wonder New Yorkers don't cook. They just eat.

New York is indeed a long way from Norman — as I discovered last December when I returned for my first Sooner Christmas in more than 25 years — a family reunion in Enid. I insisted to my kids and my parents (who have traitorously moved to Texas) that we detour through the campus and at least drive by the J-School, the student union, the Chi O house, the football stadium. After all, you can take the kid out of Oklahoma, but you can't take Oklahoma out of the kid. Ever. 