

# Hail to the retired chef, a guy unfamiliar with disaster

## Pastries tested thoroughly before served to first family

By AMY MCCONNELL SCHARRSMITH  
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

It's the inescapable question to ask a retired White House executive pastry chef, the man once responsible for making everything from ice cream to accompany the president's pie to dessert for 1,200 guests at elaborate holiday dinners.

What's the biggest disaster he experienced in his 25 years as a White House pastry chef?

None, said Roland Mesnier, who retired from White House service in July after serving every president since former President Jimmy Carter.

Every dessert was perfect, well, at least the ones seen by the president, his family and assorted dignitaries, foreign and domestic.

"We make sure of that by testing and retesting everything and the timing, and

we always had back-up," said Mesnier, the author of "Dessert University."

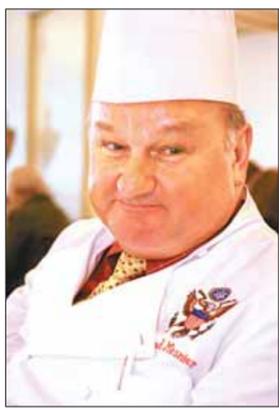
"You could not permit any disaster. It was unthinkable."

Mesnier, ruddy-cheeked and intense, has the stout build of a retired football player and the meticulous nature of a chemist.

In baking, as in chemistry, there is little room for error if you want the experiment to come out correctly.

To be a skilled baker, he said, "you have to be someone who has great patience, someone who is not afraid to work, and someone who has a certain artistic talent."

Mesnier grew up one of nine children in the French village of Bonny, popula-



SCRIPPS HOWARD PHOTO  
Ronald Mesnier had served as the White House pastry chef since the Carter administration. He retired in July.

use, in his pastries. Apple pie is his favorite dessert.

"Chocolate is chocolate, but fresh fruit

tion 140. He has been honing his pastry skills since his 14th birthday in 1958, when he became an apprentice in a family-owned French pastry shop near the Swiss border.

Money was tight, and the shop owners kept watch on waste, fining their apprentices 5 or 10 cents if they let water boil too long and checking to make sure that fruit peelings were mostly peel, not fruit.

Mesnier came to prefer working with fruit to working with chocolate, which he considers one of the easiest mediums to

is a real challenge," he said. "If you get a peach dessert, it should taste as close to the natural flavor as possible."

After serving his apprenticeship and then traveling around the world to work at various hotels, Mesnier was hired by Rosalynn Carter in 1979 to serve as the White House's sole pastry chef.

He insisted that all desserts served in the White House would be made in the White House, so that he could ensure their quality.

Part of his routine before state dinners included visiting the embassies of the foreign dignitaries being honored to get ideas for decorating the evening's dessert.

For Argentina, for instance, he made chocolate tango dancers. For Kenya, he created 20 giraffe figurines out of sugar, just as another craftsman might make them out of glass.

He wanted each dignitary to understand that the White House valued his or her country's culture and wanted to honor its cuisine and traditions. He also wanted to impress them, of course.

"You only have a couple of seconds to

make that impact when dessert comes to the table," he said.

Family dinners — which the first family pays for — were more relaxed, featuring pies, brownies and cookies.

Republican presidents tended to keep to protocol, however, and would show up for dinner in suits, Mesnier said. Democratic presidents, on the other hand, tended to wear blue jeans to the dinner table. They also had a greater fondness for leftovers than did the Republicans.

Former President Bill Clinton, for instance, so loved one of Mesnier's low-calorie strawberry cakes that he not only ate half the cake by himself but also asked later for the other half as leftovers. He was highly displeased to learn the remainder had disappeared.

Even after 25 years of such a high-pressure career, Mesnier said, he hasn't lost his love of baking and pastry.

But he does want to work on three more books, including his autobiography due out next year, a book on cakes due out in 2007 and a coffee table book on state dinner desserts due out in 2008.

## PEOPLE

# Education major to participate in model government

Laura James of Greenwood will take part in the first U.S. Model House of Representatives for a week in April.

A junior social studies education major at Indiana State University, James will take part in mock writing and voting on bills and hearings in the committee rooms of the House on Capitol Hill.

Cub Scout Pack 265 at Our Lady of the Greenwood Catholic Church baked and decorated cakes with their parents and auctioned them off to raise money for charity.

Cakes made to look like snakes, bugs, cars and Star Wars characters raised \$800 to provide food and gifts for a family of six at Christmas.

The homeowners association of Hill Valley subdivision on the



Members of Cub Scout Pack 265 and their leaders, in back from left, David Wolf, Chris Alexander and Paul Ziglar, raised money for a southside family.

south side chose winners of the Christmas decorating contest.

Artistic category winners were: Richard and Diana Music, grand prize and first place; Keith and

Kate Schnell, second; and Sean and Jennifer Brown, third.

Children's category winners were: Preston and Marilyn Maxwell, first place; Terry and

Sandra Snyder, second; and Earl and Wynoka Doughty, third.

Religious category winners were: John and Ruth Schaefer, first place; Arnold and Kathleen Feltz, second; Kenneth and Eloise Roberts, third.

John "J.J." McKee, a Greenwood Community High School junior, has earned the rank of Eagle Scout.

McKee is a member of Southport Boy Scout Troop 120. For his Eagle Scout project, he painted the cafeteria and gym at the Salvation Army in Fountain Square.

The son of Rick and Kathy McKee of Greenwood, he has attended Boy Scout camps and completed leadership training.

Items for the People column, compiled by Annette Jones, can be sent to the Daily Journal, P.O. Box 699, Franklin, IN 46131.

## • Rude

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satisfying" and are strategies for everyday survival in a sometimes maddening world.

Urbina — a man who once spiked his ice cream with salt to prevent a housemate from stealing it — argues that passive aggressiveness can also be the vehicle for "scrappy inventiveness."

Some etiquette professionals cringe at the book.

"I think it is a childish book," says Cynthia Lett, chief executive officer of the Lett Group, an etiquette consulting group.

Urbina, who says his book is not a how-to guide but an anthology, has heard the complaint before. He has been told that the angry people in the book should just get over their petty complaints and start meditating.

"I think there are some happy-go-lucky people," Urbina said. "I

choose not to hang around with them. Anyone who is truly insulted from frustrations as they move through the world is just mildly delusional."

But no matter how you handle irritants, there are plenty of them out there.

Sometimes a pet peeve can be cringe-worthy marketing terms.

Cannon, for example, likes Starbucks coffee but refuses to order in their sizes "tall, grande and venti," asking instead for small, medium and large.

Heather Lynn McNeish, a 29-year-old actor and loan closing specialist from Moon, Pa., has toyed with the idea of a creative passive-aggressive idea worthy of "Life's Little Annoyances."

She thinks it would be funny to talk fake-suggestively to a pesky telemarketer.

"I could say, 'What are you wearing, Mr. Visa man? I will buy your credit card if you tell me what you are wearing.' But I haven't tried it yet," she says.



SUBMITTED PHOTO  
Jenny Maurer of Bargersville, a member of Southside Bible Church, holds a 4-year-old Russian orphan who lives at the Vladimir Children's Home. Maurer and her family visited Russia during a mission trip.

## • Children

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE C1)

The trip was led by Jim and Amy Jurgensen, founders and directors of the Boaz Project.

The trip marked the sixth Christmas visit to Russian orphanages for the couple, who are members of Community Church of Greenwood.

The Jurgensens first went to Russia in 1993 at the invitation of the Russian Ministry of Education. They were hired to teach public school teachers a classroom curriculum based on morals and ethics.

The Boaz Project was started in March 1999 to reach Russian children in more personal ways.

On their first Christmas visit, the Jurgensens invited friends and relatives to help them take clothing and toys to orphanages.

The following November, the Boaz Project became a nonprofit missionary organization.

Based in Greenwood, it strives to meet the spiritual and physical needs of Russian orphans through financial assistance, Bible classes, job training and birthday and Christmas presents.

"We help all orphanages on a monthly basis by providing humanitarian aid," Jim Jurgensen says.

Sponsors arranged by the Boaz Project provide supplies like bedding, transmission parts for a bus, paint or wallpaper each month.

Russian staff members hired by the Boaz Project teach Bible classes and help children with homework.

Students in ninth grade must pass a test to continue their education. Children who fail are forced to leave the orphanage.

Only 2 percent of orphans go on to secondary education, the equivalent of high school in the United States, says Don Burdsall, a Boaz volunteer.

To meet the educational needs of orphans, the organization has initiated a tutoring program in

one orphanage, and a second is being organized at another.

Children who don't pass the test often end up on the streets, says Joann Richardson of Franklin.

She went on the Russia trip with her husband, Scott Richardson, and daughters Abby, 14, and Johanna, 12. The family, members of New Covenant Fellowship in Trafalgar, found both hope and misery at the orphanages.

"What was most encouraging was to meet some of the directors who truly cared for the children," Joann Richardson says. "You could see the difference. No matter how poor or how old the building, you could see the children were cared for: They were appreciative and able to interact."

"In other orphanages, there is just despair," she says. In addition to the distribution of Christmas gifts, the Boaz Project donates \$1,000 to orphanages each December.

Don Burdsall, a member of Southport Christian Church, has made three trips with the Boaz Project.

In May, he went with a crew of seven to remodel a bathroom in a children's home in far eastern Russia.

"The Russian people do a lot with very little," he says. "They don't have the (financial) resources or the manpower to do the things we do."

At two homes for orphans from birth to age 4 in the Vladimir region, local residents are hired to visit the children. Workers hold and play with the tots and tend to their needs.

At other facilities, however, babies are ignored, Burdsall says.

"It's sad," he says. "In some orphanages with few nurses to care for them, babies lie in cribs and don't respond to anything."

"They don't even cry, because they've learned no one responds."

To volunteer with or donate to the Boaz Project, call 889-7606.

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