

MENUS for Easter  
and Passover

APRIL 2001

# Gourmet

THE MAGAZINE OF GOOD LIVING

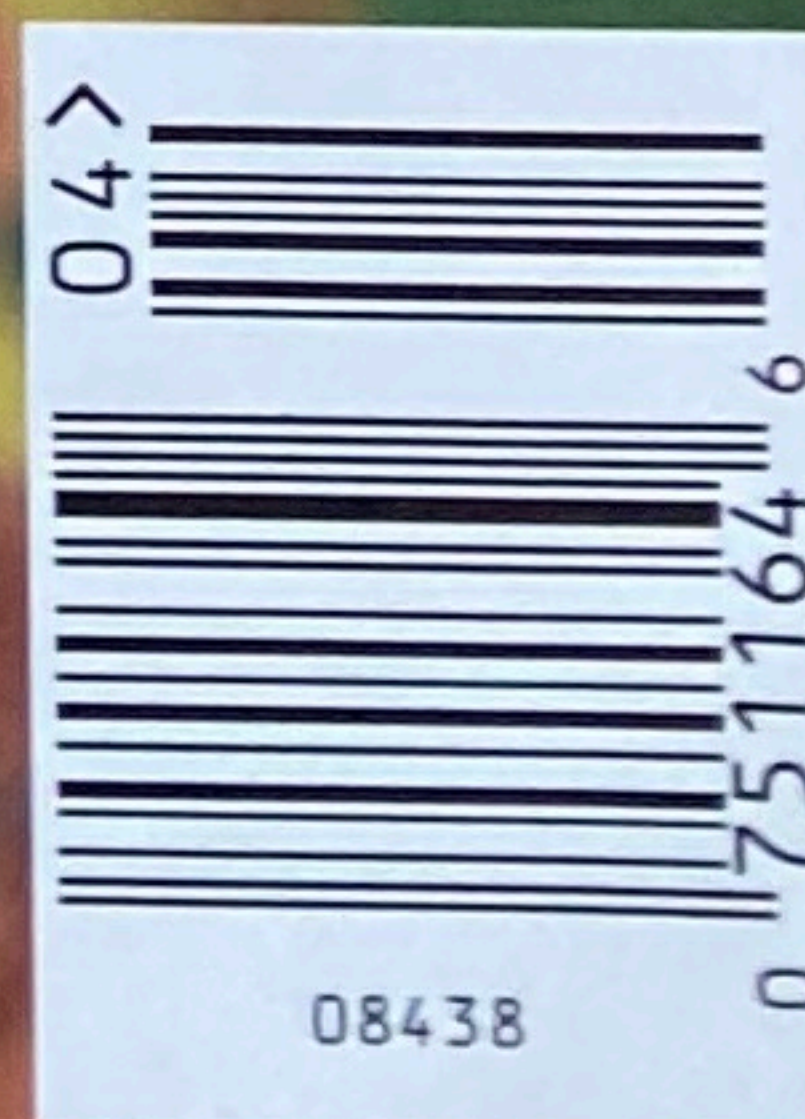
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LOVE  
LEMONS

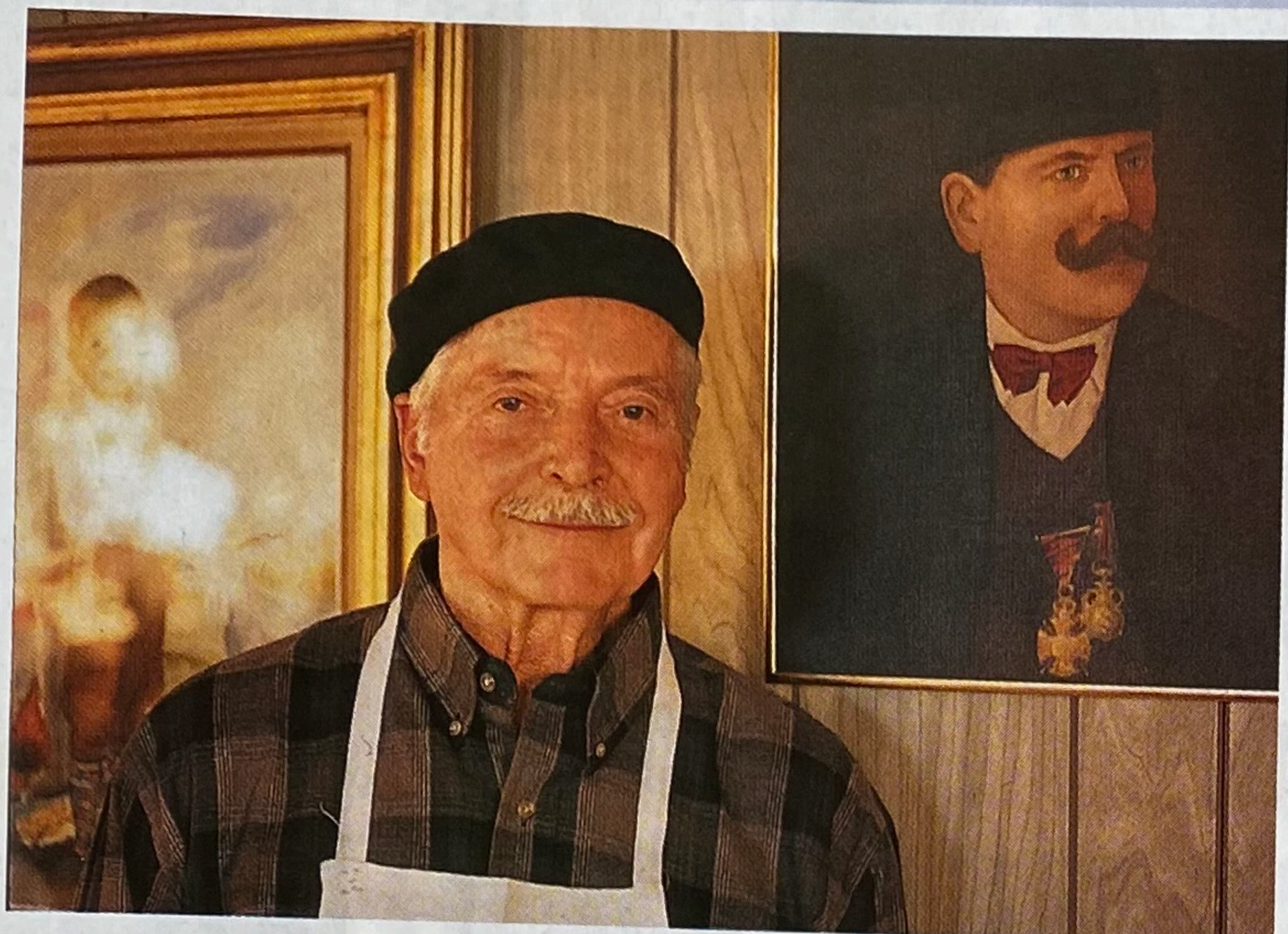
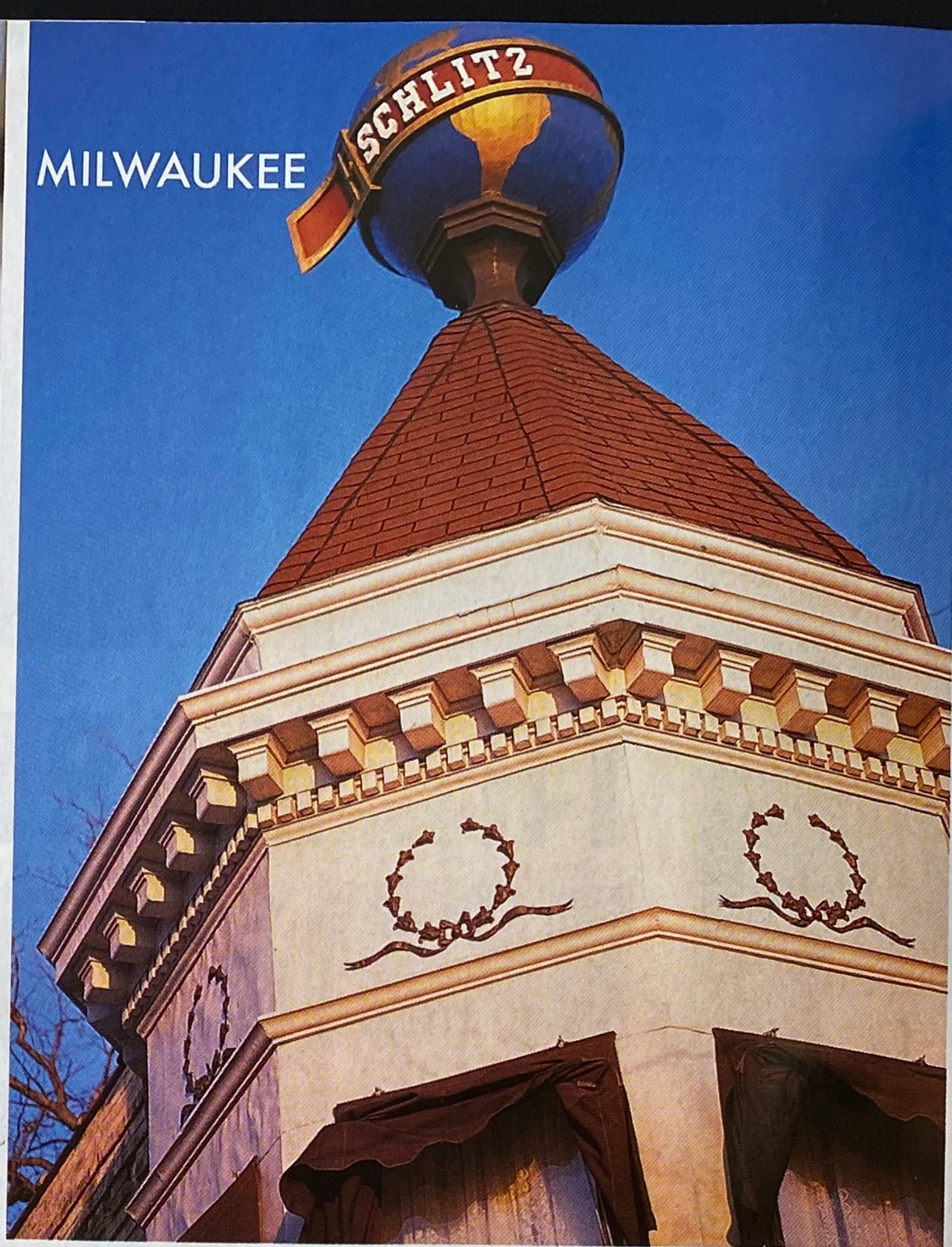
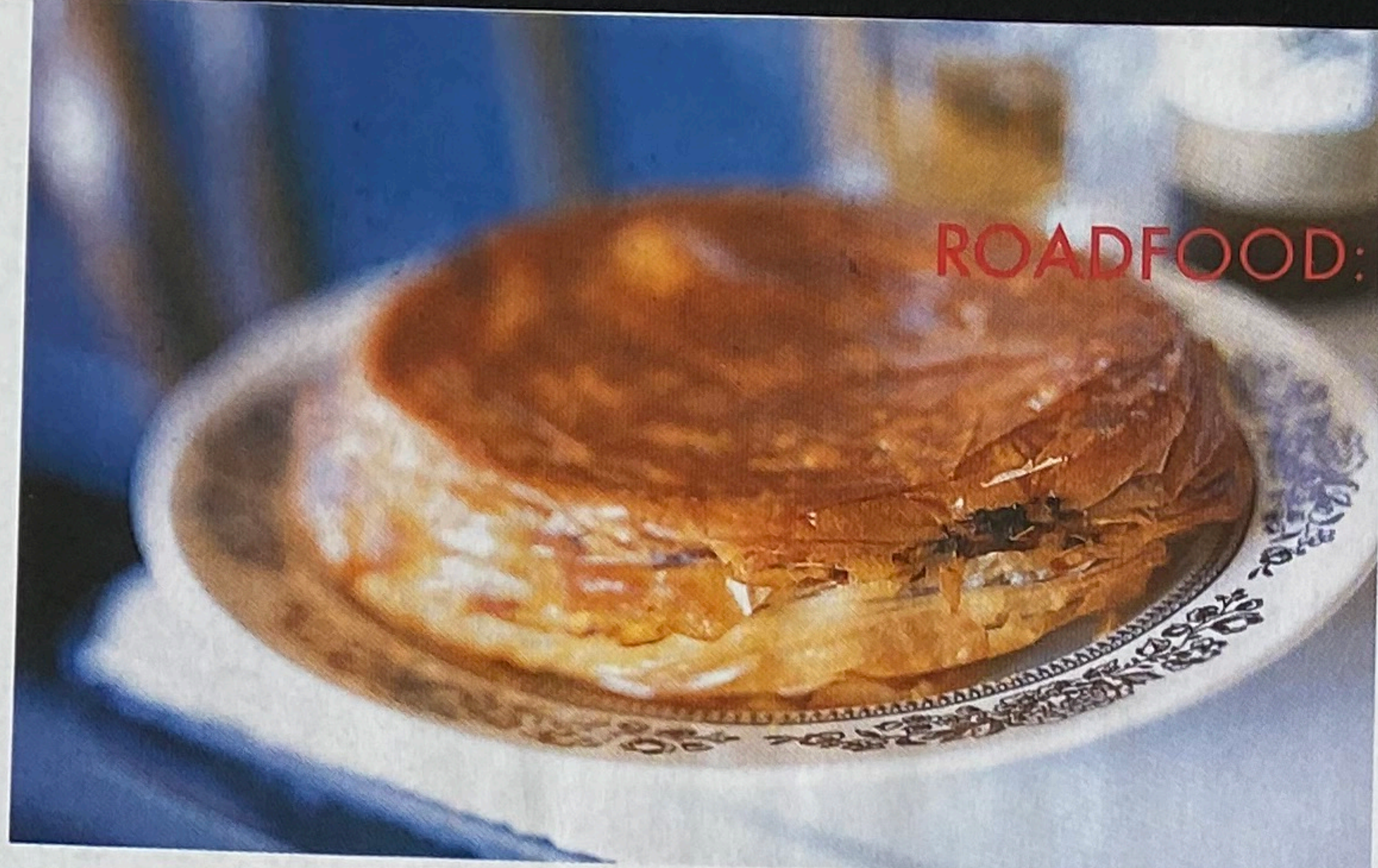
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# All in the Family

This spine-tingling tale of intrigue, war, escape, and long-lost relatives reunited is also a **mouthwatering story** of roast lamb, slivovitz, and chicken paprikás

By JANE and MICHAEL STERN

**W**HEN BRANKO Radicevic explains why his restaurant is called Three Brothers, he weeps. “My father bought this tavern in 1950. He chose the name in anticipation of his three sons coming to the United States. Alexander, Milutin, and I escaped from Yugoslavia in 1956. It was a real reunion. I had not seen my father for 15 years—we were separated in a Nazi concentration camp.”

Branko is now 78 years old and ruggedly handsome, with flowing white hair. At a bare-top, steel-banded table in the Three Brothers dining room, over chicken *paprikás* with potato dumplings and roast lamb with pickled cabbage, he gives his rousing account of fighting the Nazis as a 19-year-old leader of the underground, of capture, escape, a near-fatal shrapnel wound, two years in jail under the Communists at war’s end, and, finally, freedom in America.

In the 1930s, Branko’s father ran two restaurants in Belgrade. “The Nazis took everything,” Branko remembers, “except for some fine cherry brandy and bottles of wine that we buried.” The family was separated in 1942, and when the war was over, Branko, reunited with his mother and his siblings, traced his father’s trail from the concentration camp to a forced-labor coal mine. “I descended deep into the earth where the miners had been, but found only skeletons,” he recalls. It was more than three years later that Branko received discreet word via the British embassy that his father was alive and had just left London for the United States, but that direct contact would be dangerous. “Every year, we applied for passports,” he says. “Every year, we were denied.”

Branko’s mother, Milunka, eventually managed to join her husband in America, where they waited for their sons at the bar and restaurant he had opened in

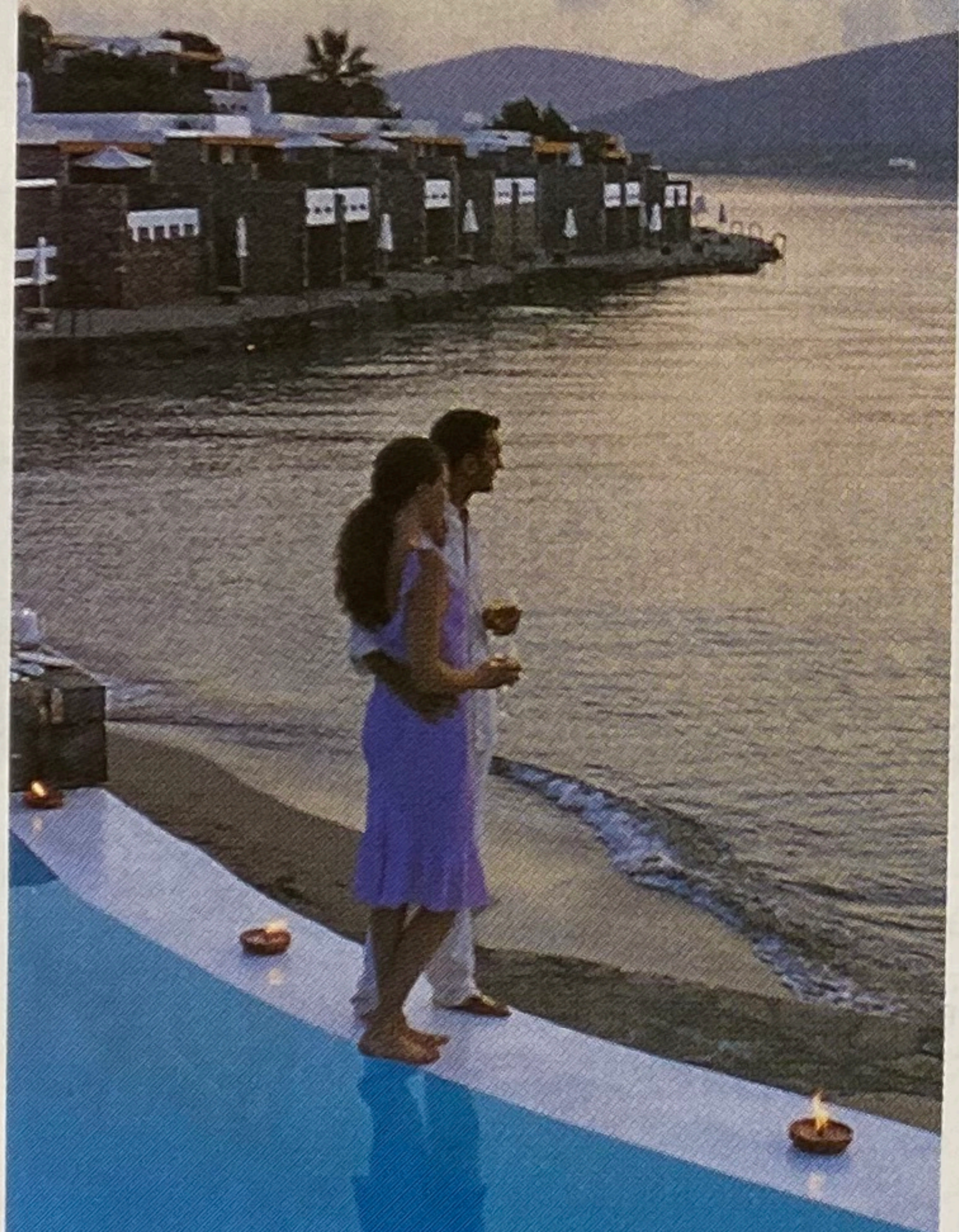
Milwaukee. She became chef, and to this day her recipes are used for nearly everything on the Three Brothers menu—from lemon-and-wine-marinated rice-stuffed grape leaves to a seven-layer fruit and walnut torte.

Although Milwaukee is a city with broad ethnic roots (and a resulting abundance of diverse restaurants), offering Serbian fare was far from a sure business venture in the 1950s. “When my father started, there were not a lot of customers,” Branko says with ironic understatement. “No one knew Serbian food; no one knew Serbia. Some thought he was serving Siberian food.”

The senior Radicevics lived above the restaurant, where Branko and his wife, Patricia, live today. “My father said, ‘It is good to live upstairs,’” Branko says. “‘If you have one too many

**Branko Radicevic, under Dad’s watchful eye, makes burek like Mom used to do.**

PHOTOGRAPHS: KENNETH CHEN



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## ROADFOOD: MILWAUKEE

and cannot walk any more, you can crawl to bed!”

As we watch Branko hosting in the dining room, welcoming a coterie of old friends for whom Three Brothers is a cultural touchstone, or observe him adjusting the spices in chicken *paprikás* or arranging a plate of impossibly opulent suckling pig in the tiny back-room kitchen, we marvel at the delight he takes in the very existence of his restaurant and the food of his heritage. In the autumn, he makes a savory pie layered with caramelized peppered leeks. “My mother’s recipe!” he exults across the dining table, eating with such amazed pleasure that you would think it was the first time he’d tasted it.

He is even more enthusiastic about roast lamb, a dish that he and his mother developed together. Cooked for three hours in its own juices with tomato, peppers, onion, and garlic, it is so tender that it’s barely on the bone. Surrounding the meat are a pile of soft pickled cabbage and thick disks of carrot bathed in butter. Branko gets upset that the lamb is brought to our table with a steak knife. “You don’t need this!” he tells us, whisking it away.

Three Brothers is best known for Mrs. Radicevic’s *burek*, a plate-wide circular plateau of phyllo leaves layered with beef, cheese, or spinach, then slow-baked until the phyllo is brittle gold around the top and sides, permeated with the flavors of the filling within. In addition to the grape leaves, which are served with pickled black olives and firm sticks of nut-sweet *kashkaval* (a sheep’s-milk cheese), the don’t-miss appetizer is a simple Serbian salad of tomatoes, green peppers, and onions. The salad is veiled with a web of a finely grated sheep’s-milk cheese that



**Three Brothers’ impossibly opulent suckling pig and, below, Serbian salad.**

is similar to mild feta. To drink, there are wines from the Balkans and malty Bip beer; and for after dinner, slivovitz or *kruškovac* (pear liqueur).

**T**HE RARE CHARM of Three Brothers’ old-country meals is enriched by the experience of eating in an urban corner tavern built in 1897. It was originally owned and operated by the Schlitz Brewing Company, whose insignia—a globe—still crowns the peak of the roof. There are no longer seats at the old bar, which runs the length of the front room and is now a service area, but the wood-floored saloon retains the warmth of a community gathering place. While a visit to Three Brothers is a special night out for many Milwaukeeans, we also noted several small tables occupied by single diners who had stopped by for a leisurely meal of roast pork loin in mustard sauce and to read a book or newspaper or to chat with Branko when he was not in the kitchen resolving culinary crises.

Branko is the soul of the Three Brothers experience; you will never eat here without meeting him, and when he goes on vacation the front door is locked. It seems poetic justice that a man who spent his early life as a displaced rebel has finally found a peaceful place that he can call home.

### THREE BROTHERS RESTAURANT

2414 South St. Clair Street  
Milwaukee  
(414) 481-7530

Dinner Tuesday through Sunday.

Dinner: main courses,  
\$10.50 to \$15.50. 🍷