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Detailing a Life Filled With Satisfying Flavor

By Sylvie Bigar

“My only regret is to have said that I liked tiramisu and white chocolate; so much evil has been done in their names,” says Gael Greene, with a trace of distaste.

She smiles but the regret is still there. She should know. From 1968 to 2000, Ms. Greene was the food critic for *New York Magazine*, experiencing, tasting, savoring, comparing and reviewing, day in and day out, for her weekly column so that readers would know where to run and what to run from.

For 32 years, she tasted it all, from Dover sole at La Côte Basque to seared yellowfin tuna at Gilbert Le Coze’s temple of fish, Le Bernardin. Mr. Le Coze, by her own admission one of Ms. Greene’s many lovers, revolutionized the way fish was cooked and presented and stunned the food world when he died from a heart attack at the age of 48.

Ms. Greene does not like to count the years, and she still looks like the dashing blonde who quietly took off her white gloves before joining Elvis on his bed. She is vibrant, intense and passionate about food, and about sex.



Gael Greene’s newest book, “*Insatiable—Tales from a Life of Delicious Excess*,” was just released by Warner Books.

“They are both about appetite for joy and sensual pleasure,” she commented quite demurely in a recent interview in Manhattan.

Her newest book, “*Insatiable—Tales from a Life of Delicious Excess*” (Warner Books 2006) is anything but demure. It is an autobiography that encompasses her food journeys, her emotionally charged love life and her sexual adventures. The book also chronicles the remarkable revolution in this country’s approach to food over the last 30 years.

Written primarily in East Hampton, the memoir recounts how the author cooked there with Pierre Franey, the celebrated chef of Le Pavillon and cookbook author, and partied with the great *New York Times* food critic Craig Claiborne at his house in Springs.

“Craig had such integrity and seriousness,” Ms. Greene said. “When I was asked to become *New York Magazine*’s restaurant critic, I said we have to do it the way Craig does: eat at a

restaurant at least three times before judging, wait three weeks after they open before going in, and pay our way.”

Clay Felker, founder of the magazine acquiesced. “People are always saying yes to me long before they find out what that means,” Ms. Greene laughed.

Ms. Greene still spends as much time as she can in the Hamptons. This fall, she said she

is looking forward to eating at some of her favorite haunts, Almondito in Wainscott, Nick and Toni's in East Hampton, and La Fondita in Amagansett.

"The problem in the Hamptons," she said, "is that it's a completely different experience on a summer weekend night. So a place that knows you and takes special care of you cannot possibly even think about it when a demanding mob is five feet deep at the bar." And while the Hamptons has changed drastically in the last 30 years, Ms. Greene's book suggests that the food world has changed even more.

"In the beginning, the word 'foodie' did not exist," the author said. "We were considered strange. We had to go to France to get a real culinary thrill. In 1968, virgin olive oil was not a fixation, because we all used butter, unless we were making pasta sauce.

"Today so many people are incredibly knowledgeable about food. People have traveled everywhere; they've been to every great restaurant. Eating in a restaurant is a hobby and a mission."

Parallel to the food evolution is the emergence of the superstar chef, but perhaps the celebrities are not the ones who really set the tone for this shift in perception.

"Jean-Georges" was the first name on her lips, but, she continued, "certainly among the most influential was Barry Wine, chef and owner of the Quilted Giraffe—many of today's great chefs passed through his kitchen. Gilbert Le Coze, Alfred Portale, who re-invented presentation. David Bouley has had an influence producing some of the best ice creams, and pastries, early on.

"Larry Forgione for the first free range chicken at the River Café, followed by Charles Palmer and David Burke, setting the stage there for an emphasis on American products. Sometimes," she laughed, "it was over the top. In France, they might identify the chicken from Bresse, but not where the onions came from!"

One Sunday morning in 1981, Ms. Greene read a story in The New York Times about elderly people who would go without meals for days at a time because the city did not have the funds to deliver meals on weekends and holidays. She picked up the phone and called her friend, the noted authority on food, James Beard. He had seen the story as well, and the two of them went to work. Today, Citymealson-Wheels delivers more than two million meals each year on weekends, weekdays, holidays, and times of emergency.

"I had no clue this would go on. It was just a whim. How can people not have enough to eat when I am living the way I live? It's hard to believe this is our 25th year. We will deliver our 32nd millionth meal on Christmas Day," she said, beaming. "We are also expanding a program of visitors; many people want a personal involvement."

In her time, Ms. Greene has seen many trends and fads. But in her eyes, nothing beats ripe, locally grown produce. "Eat, taste, stay open, share with people, and go to the farmer's market," she advised. But hasn't that kind of life played havoc with her weight?

"Well, dancing every night in the '70s and '80s took care of that. We would dance all night and then walk home."

And how about a food critic's last meal? Foie gras? Caviar? No way.

"It would definitely include macaroni and cheese, something a little better than Mom's but in that style," she said, "and then cherry pie and maybe spareribs."

"It would be nice if Gilbert Le Coze came back," she concluded with a sigh, "and cooked it for me."