

PROFILE

French made

As owner of upscale Chez Georges and the new Bistro Provence, restaurateur Georges Guy has brought temperament and taste to the table



Georges Guy: 'I wanted to prove at Bistro Provence that French food can be good and doesn't have to be expensive.'

By Walker C. Wooding Jr.
Houston Business Journal

Not long after Georges Guy took over an eatery at Kirkwood and Westheimer and renamed it Chez Georges, a group of customers set him off.

Ten diners came into the restaurant. They ordered from the menu but requested so many changes that the dishes became unrecognizable. When waitress Benedicte Carbonnier delivered the orders to Guy, he blew his top.

Enraged, he decided to dispense with the pleasantries.

"He created something different and gave me food the people didn't even order," Carbonnier says. "I was embarrassed."

But when she made her way back to the group, her embarrassment was only short-lived.

"It was 10 different dishes, and they absolutely loved it," says Carbonnier, now a manager at Lynn's Steakhouse.

The group asked for Guy to emerge from the kitchen and join them at their table.

"A good customer is not necessarily one who pays for the meal," says Guy. "It's about how the customer enjoys the meal. To please your customer, you have to rule out money."

Forty years as a French chef, Guy is no doubt a stubborn perfectionist. And indeed, he has a passion for cooking that does come with a temper — a creative temper for food and a caring temperament for his family.

Guy is now owner and chef at Bistro Provence and Bistro Provence II, a pair of restaurants serving French cuisine. His restaurant operation now includes wife Monique Guy, a co-owner, sons Jean-Philippe Guy and Lionel Guy, daughter Laurence Paul and son-in-law Christophe Paul.

"My dad left France in 1982 with \$5000 in his pocket and three

kids and said, 'I'm going to make my dream happen,' " says son Lionel. "Not many people have the guts to do that."

CHILI RECEPTION

Georges Guy began training as a chef in his native France at the tender age of 13 — so young that, with his boyish frame, he needed a box to stand on to reach the stockpot.

After years of training, Guy and his family moved to the United States in 1982, where he worked as executive chef at a number of Houston restaurants, including The Brittany, Chez Pierre and Caprice in the old Plaza Hotel on Montrose Boulevard.

He later became corporate chef at Cezanne, a large restaurant in Pensacola, Fla. Moving back to Houston, Guy started up the kitchen and devised the menu at the now-defunct Cleo's 21.

All the while, Guy took his irascibility with him. When new

management at Cleo's decided to put catsup on the table and chili on the menu, Guy bolted, heading back across the Atlantic to France, where he spent two years managing a small resort hotel and restaurant in Aix en Provence on the French Riviera.

The exodus epitomizes Guy's self-proclaimed meticulous nature when it comes to doing it right, and it's only one example of how Guy passionately defends his culinary craft — and his family.

Once, at Chez Georges, a couple complained to daughter Laurence about their food. When she offered some suggestions, they fired back that they didn't like French food and called her a rude French person.

Her father responded quickly. "He burst out of the kitchen and told them that they didn't have to pay," says Laurence. "He told them to leave because they were insulting me. If there is anybody who does anything mean regarding his family, he's

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going to get very angry."

FAMILY DINING

Guy applied that same intensity to his first bid at restaurant operation - Chez Georges.

"I wanted to prove myself," says Guy. "It was a challenge, and I wanted to work for myself."

Although working for himself was always the plan, working by himself never was. Often, Georges and Monique Guy enlisted their children to pitch in. Being raised in the restaurant business cast a spell on the Guy children. They might have considered other opportunities, but the restaurant was like a magnet.

Not only does son Jean-Philippe say he was raised in the restaurant business, he was almost born in a restaurant, too. Monique went into labor pains with him while working with Guy in a restaurant in France. Not long after Jean-Philippe was born, he might as well have been doing the dishes or serving the food.

"My mother would bottle feed me while my father prepared the food in the kitchen," says Jean-Philippe. "When he finished preparing the food, he would take over feeding me and my mother would go serve the food."

When Jean-Philippe entered his late teens, he tried to find something else to do - the Army, psychology or something. But he eventually remained working part time, and is now general manager of the Bistro Provence restaurant in Memorial.

"When it's in your blood, what do you do?" says Jean-Philippe.

Lionel says his parents never pushed them to stay in the restaurant business, but they did push them to work.

"It wasn't like in a lot of families where they gave you an allowance," says Lionel. "They said, 'If you want an allowance, you come to work.' It wasn't easy being a kid. But as you grew up, you learned values."

Lionel started as a dishwasher and is now a manager at the Memorial location of Bistro Provence.

Laurence began working on the weekends when she was 15 years old. She didn't like it much. But the upside was she had somewhere to go and didn't have to go look for a job.

"I never thought I would still be involved," says Laurence, who is expecting her first child in June with husband Christophe. "But now I'm getting hooked. I'm catching the restaurant fever."

NEW RECIPES

In November 1998, the Guys and their children opened Bistro Provence in Houston's Memorial area, a true bistro that features the hearty, country fare of southern France. The immediate popularity of the new concept sent the family a message that Houstonians enjoyed more casual dining.

They converted the more formal Chez Georges to Bistro Provence II and reopened it a year ago. The success of the new restaurants are a far cry from the early days at Chez Georges, times neither Georges or Monique Guy have forgotten. They had to work five years before they began to reap any rewards from the efforts they were making.

"What we did in gross sales in one week, we now do in one day," says Monique.

'A good customer is not necessarily one who pays for the meal.'

GEORGES GUY

The conversion included adding a wood burning oven and redecorating the formal restaurant with country French touches.

"When I came in 1982, there were just a few French restaurants," says Guy. "But the cooking meant a huge plate, a small portion and a big price. I wanted to prove at Bistro Provence that French food can be good and doesn't have to be expensive."

For Guy, the new eateries breathe new life into a concept designed to offer a more casual café with a menu that would be less demanding than

the rigors of the classic French kitchen.

"After almost 40 years as a chef, the prospect of changing my menu from one that required my constant vigilance in the kitchen to one that was less demanding of my time was appealing," says Guy.

The Guy family divides responsibilities of their two operations. The younger generation is in charge of the front of the house. But chef Georges Guy, as always, is in charge of the kitchen. Although he claims to be in "semi-retirement" after converting Chez Georges, he can't seem to find the exit door.

"I don't think he will ever retire," says Jean-Philippe. "After 40 years of working, I don't think he could ever stop. As long as he's still working, that means that he's still healthy."

In true bistro fashion, the menu at these casual French eateries has attracted a clientele that includes all their old regulars from the Chez Georges days, along with new patrons who are just discovering the pleasures of French bistro fare.

"He's been undervalued and underappreciated in the city," says Teresa Byrne-Dodge, publisher of *My Table: Houston's Dining Guide*. "It's because he's so modest. He doesn't blow his own horn. I hear people say that there's not a good French restaurant in the city. But we've had a great French restaurant here for 12 years."

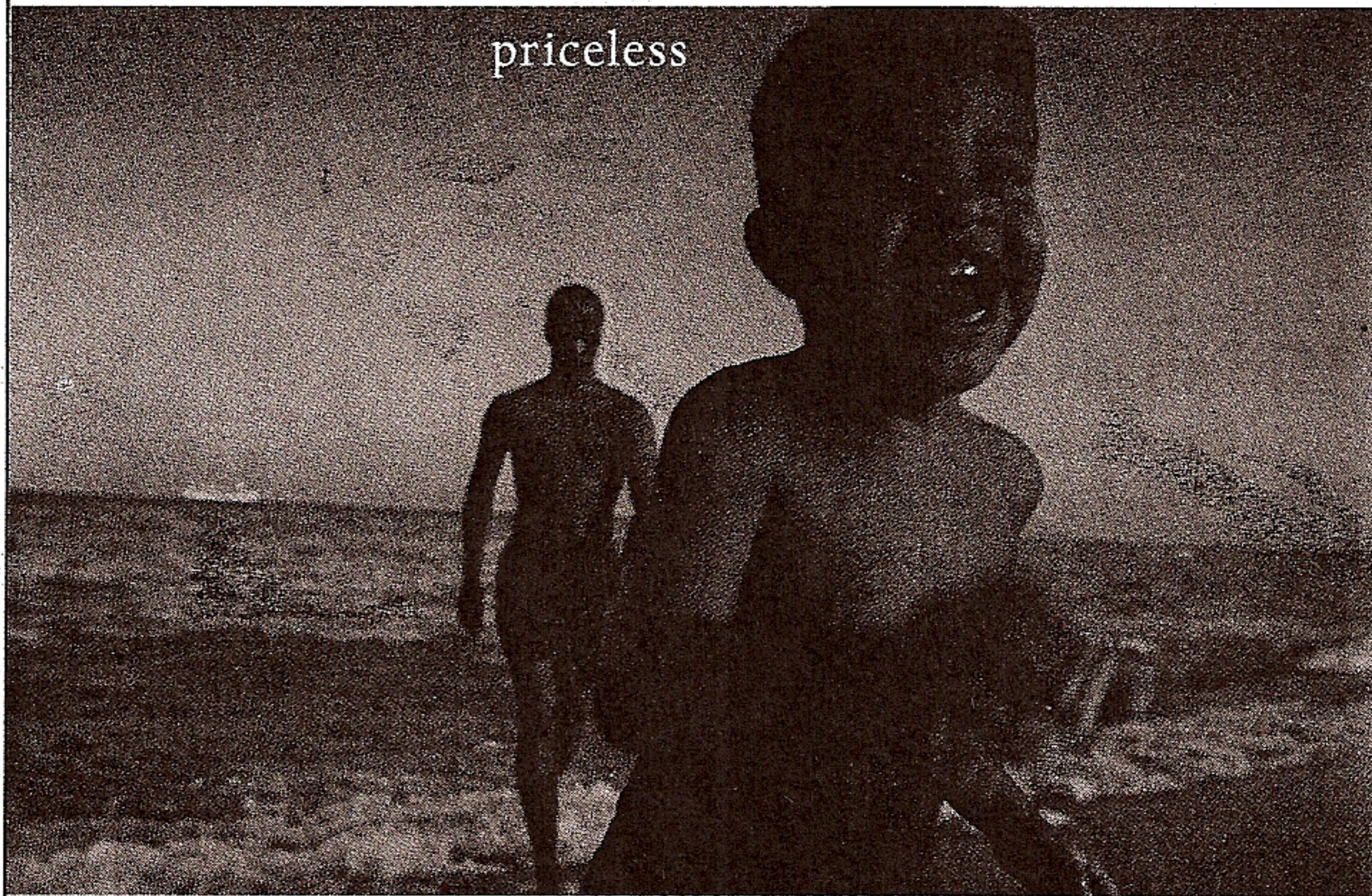
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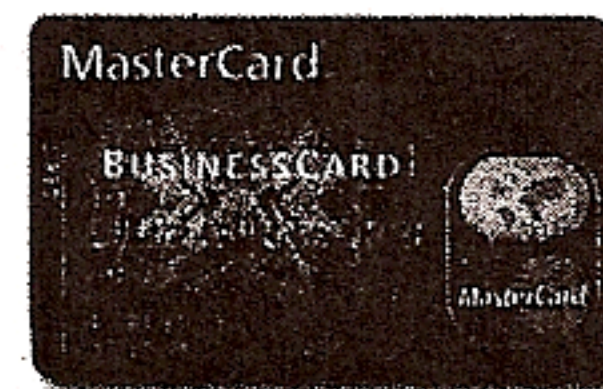
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