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FOOD - Here Comes the Chow

By JONATHAN REYNOLDS

Red and I were married last month (sorry, boys), and if you haven't been recently but are interested, there are a couple of ways to go about it. Of course you can always go the stressless, inexpensive and most direct route by taking a \$35 money order to the City Clerk's office (no blood test needed) to get your license and 24 hours later swarm the hallways with a much friendlier, if smaller and apolitical, United Nations waiting to be wed.

But if you believe argument, anxiety and financial deprivation make for a colorful introduction to your new life together, you can exercise your culinary and aesthetic vision by doing what we did: invite everybody you know and give a party. To add frisson, make sure your Beloved is designing sets for the "Dracula" and "Little Princess" musicals, both due at roughly the same time - last week. Then try to get your publisher to phone and say: "You know that January '05 deadline? It's now July '04." And if you're tired of sleeping deeply without aquavit, you can intensify the time contingency to, say, two months.

We struck gold almost immediately. After visiting a handful of reception venues -- mostly low-ceilinged, gold and "tasteful" -- we stumbled across the Angel Orensanz Foundation, a funky palace on Norfolk Street with 54-foot ceilings and a faint odor of religiosity, ruin and Eastern Europe. There was no runner-up to the Angel. But what were we going to eat there?

Wait a minute, first things first. Red and I, both lapsed Episcopalians (Red severely lapsed, as in atheistic; me still wondering: Well, if he rose from the dead, isn't that pretty persuasive? And if he didn't . . . likewise?), agreed to see a few churches on the theory -- mostly mine -- that you're not really married unless it's recognized by something a little more cosmic than New York State. After rejecting the Church of the Heavenly Rest's "Fountainhead" interior and the Gothic splendor of Grace Church, because I'd already been married there, we wound up at what may be the loveliest treasure in the diocese: the Church of the Ascension at 10th Street and Fifth Avenue. Designed in the Gothic Revival style, the church is adorned with an enormous mural by John La Farge (once the largest painting in North America) and a Tiffany stained-glass window and, most important, radiates an unpretentious sincerity of mission. All but the opportunistic are welcome. As the rector, Andrew Foster, implied, this wasn't a stage set for rent; he had to know we were serious of purpose. And thus, between food planning, wine tasting and heated discussions about music, photographers, invitations, dresses, suits

and length of honeymoon, we met with Father Andrew weekly for an exploration of the essentials. Painless and enlightening, it forced us to focus on the marriage itself.

By this time, I had contacted several caterers with serious reputations for events like J. Lo's next wedding and Madonna's kabala ordination. All came up with menus that featured what I call the teeny-tiny fussies: little phyllos with baby somethings, pancakes folded nine ways and stuffed with trendiness, taquitoettes filled with cedar-planked shrimp loin -- the sort of preciousity that makes me want to run around the corner for a good pulled pork.

All bids were ambitious (on our behalf, of course) and expensive (on theirs). As one friend said, "When caterers hear the word 'wedding,' they start adding on the zeros." You might want to tell them you're planning a wake and see what happens.

Because I'm cheap, and like being cheap, and like even better being thought of as cheap, I phoned each and asked them to cut their prices in half. Two never phoned back, but one, Chef Rossi, e-mailed that she would be glad to. Guess who leapt to the front of the pack?

We wanted a menu that would surprise, mixing high (to show we could) and low (so people might eat and smile). I conjured sea urchin juxtaposed with corn dogs, Belon oysters next to mini-cheeseburgers, maybe little bags of those superb fries from Cafe de Bruxelles with caviar akimbo. And since cooking can be performance, perhaps a station for a cook to make bouillabaisse in front of your eyes, and the gent with the stainless cart on 53rd and Sixth Avenue would throw together his chicken curry in a pita (with the aluminum foil and all those mystery sauces, of course) accompanied by celery root shoestrings. Chef Rossi was enthused -- but as the date approached, lightning struck.

From left field, enter Scarsdale.

Scarsdale? Lynn Sobel, an ebullient party planner, recommended Sharon Snyder's company, Standing Room Only (S.R.O.). A caterer from Scarsdale? How unchic, how reverse-droll, how . . . suburban. But also how reasonable in both expense and control, how eager to please, how energetic! Sharon welcomed the challenge -- even the requests to replicate the smoked tea duck from the East Side Grand Szechuan International and Madhur Jaffrey's incomparable mango soup. We decided on S.R.O. and motored to Scarsdale to sample.

What a joy. Nothing but cheer and imagination from Sharon, and her chef, Herb Lindstrom, spun a superb sea urchin ceviche by infusing it with lemongrass, chilies and lime; excellent gingered green beans; and brilliant finger-food lamb chops (teeny-tiny but not fussy), their bones wrapped in

scallion "sleeves." We discussed, made notes, drank wine, threw some darts at the menu and decided that with cocktails we would pass the sea urchin, green beans and lamb chops, plus fries in bags, pencil-thin sausages, little mac-and-cheeses; that we would serve wedges of iceberg with Roquefort and the mango soup at the table; that our guests would then visit stations where bouillabaisse, lamb tagine and smoked duck would be assembled while they waited; and that a street cart would sport chicken curry. If anyone was still standing, out would come a carrot wedding cake and bowls of banana splits.

We asked only that the duck be smokier and that physics be defied by standing the mac-and-cheese on its own, without redundantly starchy pastry or ramekins -- impossible, of course -- and fled to the city for the finale.

The clock ticks grew louder. Sharon went to work. The original florist, with an estimate of \$18,000, was replaced by Jane Carroll, who charged six and came up with unique, almost confrontational arrangements; we lined up a mos' danceable band called the Manhattan Rhythm Machine, suggested by Red's choreographer (gospel outside the church, doo-wop outside the Angel); Red arranged for double-decker buses and pedal cabs to get us to the reception; the photog was engaged; we decided against the full Ascension choir, a soprano and Handel's "Zadok the Priest" and in favor of Purcell strings in the church; Sharon rushed into town with two carrot cakes under her arm for us to try -- we chose pecans over walnuts -- then zoomed back to Scarsdale. As we panicked, Lynn Sobel took over like the driver of one of those out-of-control stagecoaches in an old western. Red's three boys and my two were suited and pink-tied so they could usher and act as givers-of-the-bride and best men respectively.

And suddenly we were at the altar. I don't remember a thing except that I knew I was doing the right thing and that Red looked resplendent in a Gabrielle Carlson gilded oyster dress. I'm told that Wendy Wasserstein and Oliver Clark read humorous marital quotes I had assembled ("No man should marry until he has studied anatomy and dissected at least one woman" -- Balzac) and that two of Red's sisters read Shakespeare's Sonnet 30 and that my brother and sister read a few verses from Song of Solomon (not the usual ones). A hundred and fifty people filled the pews, Whoever Is in Charge arranged for a beautiful day (Red is reconsidering her atheism) and Father Andrew calmly wrapped our ringed hands in vestments. We kissed, and it was fact.

Out of the church we headed to startling applause, then everyone mounted the double-deckers and pedal cabs and headed for the Angel waving hats. Pedestrians stopped to applaud as we went by.

Not everything came off exactly as planned. The band played "Moonglow" but not "Moonglow/Theme From 'Picnic,'" and there wasn't enough rouille with the bouillabaisse. But the variety and surprise of the food and the jolliness in the ether made the guests smile (or so they reported), and

Sharon miraculously managed to get the mac-and-cheese to stand on its own! Lynn oversaw the works with her mighty sword, the band played till 11 and 42 days later, the bride and groom are still talking.

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Mac-and-Cheese

1 pound elbow macaroni

4 cups heavy cream

1 1/2 pounds shredded mild yellow Cheddar cheese

1/4 pound shredded American cheese

Vegetable oil for greasing pan

1 cup panko bread crumbs

1 cup finely grated Parmesan cheese.

1. Cook the macaroni in salted boiling water until al dente. Drain.(Do not rinse it or add oil to the cooking water.) Line an 11-by-17-inch sheet pan with parchment paper. Spread the macaroni out on it. Let cool.

2. Meanwhile, pour the cream into a large pot and simmer until reduced to 2 cups. Stir in the Cheddar and American cheeses. Continue stirring until well blended. Add the macaroni and cook over high heat, stirring constantly, until very thick.

3. Grease the pan with the oil. Pour in the macaroni and spread evenly. Cover with plastic wrap. Refrigerate overnight.

4. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Using a 1 1/2-inch metal cutter, cut out rounds of macaroni. Combine the panko and Parmesan in a bowl and dredge the rounds in the mixture. Bake on an ungreased sheet pan until just warmed, about 5 minutes. Serve immediately.

Yield: About 70 rounds.

Lamb Chops

1 rack (8 ribs) New Zealand baby lamb, trimmed of excess fat and Frenched by your butcher

Coarse sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 cup extra-virgin olive oil

3 cloves garlic, chopped

Leaves from 2 sprigs rosemary, chopped.

1. Preheat a grill or grill pan until very hot. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Season the lamb with the salt and pepper.

2. Mix the oil, garlic and rosemary. Spoon half on the lamb and grill 1 minute per side. Place on a sheet pan and cover with the rest of the marinade. Roast in the oven until an instant-read thermometer reaches 125 degrees for rare, 130 degrees for medium rare.

3. Cool for 5 minutes, then slice off individual chops and serve with sea salt for dipping. (S.R.O. uses tiny lamb chops, which fit into scallion "sleeves." The racks generally sold by your butcher will be too big for this touch.)
Yield: 8 appetizer servings.