

**Maribeth Maloney:** Hey, where's the cookbook? Your rustic, Provençal-inspired dishes are brilliant and ought to be shared!

**Geoff Gardner:** Someday...

**MM:** I understand. My printer burst into flames while churning out your press kit. You've got no time! Not only have you been garnering top ratings for Sel de la Terre from such publications as *Condé Nast Traveler* and *Esquire* magazine over the past seven years, you just opened a second location at the Natick Collection, launched a full-service catering company, Au Soleil Catering, opened a wholesale bakery, Au Soleil Bakery, and a third Sel de la Terre will be opening next summer at the posh, new Mandarin Oriental Boston! Fess up – you've been cloned, haven't you?

**GG:** I wouldn't wish that on the world.

**MM:** Two words — first reaction: Frank McClelland.

**GG:** Mentor, friend, business partner.

**MM:** How about culinary juggernaut? As chef/owner of Boston's famed L'Espalier, there's no award or accolade that's not been bestowed upon him for his modern take on refined French-New England inspired cuisine, including the coveted James Beard Award for "Best Chef, Northeast." In addition to being your partner in all of the Sel de la Terre and Au Soleil ventures, he's your guru – you spent eight years as his sous chef at L'Espalier. What qualities do you think he most admired in you as a young chef?

**GG:** Determination, passion, focus, follow-through and intensity.

**MM:** You're a graduate of Boston University; I'm a B.C. grad. Does that make us enemies?

**GG:** Certainly not!

**MM:** Whew!

**MM:** You majored in Restaurant Management; I spent the years contemplating the theory of existence with the Jesuits... Did your dollars go to good use or was the best education what you learned on the job?

**GG:** My education at B.U. was invaluable, but I do believe that the best education is working in the field.

**MM:** Agreed. The theory of existence industry has taught me a lot.

**MM:** How many knuckleheads have called you "G-off"?

**GG:** Growing up – lots. Nowadays, only the occasional telemarketer.

**MM:** Your grandfather inspired your love of cooking. Tell me about your most wonderful memories.

**GG:** What he actually inspired was my love of food, mostly on the consumption side! He exposed me to the world beyond pizza and cheeseburgers. We'd make deals – one day what we ate was my choice, the next was his. He'd cook, I'd eat and love it and then find out it was beef tongue or liver and onions. He broke down the barriers and stimulated my love of all food.

**MM:** You traveled extensively throughout France before joining L'Espalier, and the region of Provence had the greatest impact on you. What was the best meal you ate there?

**GG:** It was a dish at a little hole in the wall in Le Boux. I asked them to forget that I was an American tourist and serve me what the chef liked most. A pork liver sausage came out — jet black and all studded with herbs, served with a tomato and onion ragoût. It was delicious — a little scary to look at, but that's what made it memorable.

**MM:** You're my hero...you can bake! You're a self-taught artisan and each of your restaurants includes a boulangerie featuring your award-winning, signature breads. I once attempted a pound cake; it's remembered as the ton cake. Any words of wisdom for the leavening-challenged?



with **Geoff Gardner**  
*Chef/Proprietor*  
*Sel de la Terre,*  
*Boston*



*Catch Chef Gardner while you can at  
 The White Elephant's "Chef & Shop" Series,  
 November 9-11*

*Cooking Demonstration is at 3 p.m. on  
 Saturday call 325-1320 for reservations.*

**GG:** Patience and trial and error. It's the finesse you put into it that makes the difference. Experiment when you have the time – we learn more from our failures than our successes.

**MM:** Sel de la Terre has a special children's menu, and while I'd like to believe that les enfants nibbling on "Beignets de Poulet" behave better than those scoffing down chicken fingers, I don't. What's the worst thing a kid's ever done at your restaurants?

**GG:** A child at my new restaurant in Natick took a steak knife and proceeded to jab it into the brand new leather banquette while the parents just sat there.

**MM:** Yow. I was only prepared for poulet on the floor.

**MM:** Some other chef tried to tell me he only had socks in his sock drawer. I didn't buy it. What's hidden in yours?

**GG:** My extra set of car keys.

**MM:** That's headway.

**MM:** Your late-night menu looks like it was designed for...soaking up! Grilled Brioche and Cheddar and the SDLT Burger with Smoked Onions and Bleu Cheese. What's the worst behavior you've ever witnessed from a late-night imbiber/soaker?

**GG:** I don't know if this is bad enough, but it drives me nuts and it usually happens late at night: People love our bathroom wallpaper and instead of asking us for swatches, they peel off corners to take home to their decorators.

**MM:** Decorators and swatches? I was thinking more along the lines of jabbing a steak knife into the banquette.

**MM:** What's the fastest way to your heart?

**GG:** I love it when people cook for me. I don't expect anything fancy – it's a treat to go to someone's house for a burger. Food has power; it's a personal and wonderful gift to share.

## CHICKEN FRICASSE

*Compliments of Sel de la Terre –*

- One 3-4 pound fresh free range chicken, cut up
- 1 cup diced, smoked bacon
- 2 Spanish onions, sliced thin
- 1 quart canned plum tomatoes
- 8 garlic cloves, chopped
- 5 green bell peppers
- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- Fresh thyme
- 1 cup dry white wine

*Roast peppers in oven until skin bubbles and peppers become soft. Allow to cool. Remove skin and seeds; reserve. Heat olive oil and bacon in casserole crock. Season chicken with salt and pepper; add to pot and sear on all sides. Add onions and white wine and simmer for 15 minutes over medium heat. Add garlic, tomatoes and peppers; cover and continue to simmer 15 more minutes. Season with salt, pepper and thyme and continue to simmer 15 minutes longer. Accompany with jasmine rice. Serves 4 – 6.*

**MM:** I spent one night of my life as a waitress and promptly quit before I was fired. What do you look for when hiring wait staff?

**GG:** A little experience so they know what they're getting into. Restaurants are wild and crazy – some people thrive on it and some run for the door. I mostly look for the intangibles – what makes people tick, their passions, whether they want to be part of a team and make people happy. I look for personal traits because we can teach them to wait tables.

**MM:** I'm unteachable; hence, the door.

**MM:** Describe the ultimate sandwich.

**GG:** The SDLT: smoked duck, lettuce and tomato on semolina sourdough.

**MM:** Hillary or Obama?

**GG:** No comment...can I say "not Hillary?"

**MM:** You just did.

**MM:** What should be done to people with the audacity to not cancel dinner reservations?

**GG:** Ugh! Drawn and quartered!

**MM:** No swatches for them!

**MM:** What would a reality show about you be called?

**GG:** "Your worst nightmare."

**MM:** If only that were true.

**MM:** Suppose I told you I don't eat meat, poultry, butter or oil — what would you cook for me?

**GG:** Chicken Fricassee.

**MM:** Come again?

**GG:** I'd try to convert you, like I converted my wife. As the saying goes, "If God didn't want us to eat animals, he wouldn't have made them out of meat."

**MM:** Remember how I was unteachable? I'm also unconvertible.

**MM:** Would Au Soleil Catering take its show on the road and cater events on Nantucket?

**GG:** Sure! It's just a ferry ride away.

**MM:** Running a restaurant on the island can be a rollercoaster ride. What do you admire most about those who do?

**GG:** Everything! I've never understood how they do it...how they deal with the seasonality from both cash-flow and staffing standpoints.

**MM:** A round of applause!

**MM:** Final question. I want to leave you in a deep, zen-like state: If chefs ruled the earth, would eternal peace and harmony reign or would we be worse off than we are now?

**GG:** There would *not* be peace and harmony. Could it be worse? That's hard to know, but it's possible.

**MM:** So much for zen. ■