Barry Wine: From Lawyer to Restauranteur

Tim Harper

At the door, Barry Wine’s disappointment is only momentary. “Ah, come on in,” he says. “I was looking for the truffles guy.”

He leads the way up the thickly carpeted stairway to the second floor of The Quilted Giraffe, the restaurant he and his wife, Susan, own and operate on Second Avenue between 50th and 51st Streets in Manhattan.

The Quilted Giraffe is considered one of the best restaurants in one of the best restaurant towns in the world. It has a coveted four-star rating, the minimum price for a meal is $70 and reservations generally must be made a month or two in advance. It is where rich people go on the cook’s night off, where tycoons go to celebrate big deals and where the chefs and owners of other exclusive restaurants go for a fine dinner—and tips on how it should be done.

The menu is innovative, an extraordinary blend of preparations aimed at creating new tastes and refining old ones, using everything from peanut butter and jelly to caviar and, yes, truffles.

The Quilted Giraffe represents the remarkable story of how a young couple from Milwaukee with no restaurant experience took on the cruel, cold and usually closed world of haute cuisine.

It is noon in the deserted upstairs dining room, all snowy white linen, polished heavy silver and sparkling crystal amid the dark wood and art deco mirrors. Barry Wine punches a button on a phone.

“Call me if the truffles guy comes,” he instructs.

Wine is a shade under medium height, with close-cropped hair, the slightest paunch and a small but quick smile. His striped shirt is pressed but not starched, and his tie is silk but not too fancy for daytime and shirtsleeves. He wears gray cotton slacks and soft deck-shoe moccasins. He seems younger than his 42 years.

He tells the story of Barry and Susan Wine offhandedly, without the usual reverence reserved for it among other restaurateurs.

His parents and Susan’s parents had been friends for a long time. In fact, her mother and father and his parents now live across the street from each other.

Barry and Susan knew each other in high school, but there was four years difference in their ages. So they didn’t start going out until he was 23 and at the University of Chicago Law School and she was 19 and going to Barnard College in New York City.

They got married in December, 1966, during his second year of law school, and moved back to New York after he graduated so she could finish at Barnard. He worked first as an investment banker, and later as a securities lawyer at one of the big Wall Street firms. After graduating, she

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worked on Wall Street, too, first in a clerical job at a computer company and later at another law firm as a paralegal.

"We didn't like living in New York," Barry says. "We hated taking the subway to work."

In 1970, their first child, Winfred, was born, and they bought a rambling, Victorian-style house 90 miles up the Hudson River in New Paltz, N.Y. Barry hung out a shingle and took on legal work—divorces, criminal cases, wills, anything that townsfolk would bring him. Susan opened a gallery featuring local arts and crafts, including quilting. Their son, Thatcher, was born in 1972.

In 1975, the Wines opened a restaurant in a building housing the art gallery. "We hoped it would bring in more business to the gallery," he says.

They decorated it with stuff from the gallery, and since they had more baby quilts with giraffes than anything else, the place became The Quilted Giraffe.

Barry said his only experience with restaurants was eating out a lot. So the Wines recruited a chef, who quit before the restaurant opened. The second one cut his thumb and decided to become a writer. Others couldn't seem to do things the way the Wines wanted them done. Barry finally gave up law altogether and became the chef.

"I'd cook a steak and have no idea whether it was going to be done enough when I served it," he says. "At first all we did was stuff right out of Julia Child, like duck a l'orange and veal Prince Orloff."

But he learned. And he experimented. He and Susan went to New York on their Wednesday nights off to eat in a good restaurant and shop for the weekend's provisions at the city's markets the following dawn. On vacations they went to France and ate at the best-known bistro and the little-known country inns. At home, Barry tried to duplicate and adapt the dishes he had tried, sometimes inventing entirely new concoctions of his own.

The Quilted Giraffe became known for innovative dishes. But the Wines wanted more. New Paltz could never provide the steady, don't-bat-an-eye-at-the-price clientele they needed for a really first-class restaurant.

In 1979, they moved back to New York and rented the Bonanza Coffee Shop, a failing diner between an Irish pub and a Korean fruit stand. They ripped out the steam tables and the booths and the lunch counter and replaced it all with French modern. They moved in upstairs, where they would never have to take a subway to work again.

They put in richly stained wainscoting and frosted glass. They painted the walls a deep cream. The herd of quilted giraffes from New Paltz were replaced by subdued oils and, for posterity, one framed giraffe quilt done by a New York artist. They tore apart the kitchen and made it over. They hired and trained a staff. They set the fixed-price dinner at $28.50 and opened the doors.

A year later, New York Times food critic Mimi Sheraton gave The Quilted Giraffe one star, denoting "good" food and service. A year later, it went to two stars, for "very good." Finally, in early 1984, the Times' Marian Burros gave The Quilted Giraffe her first four-star rating and only the sixth in a city of 100,000 restaurants. They had skipped right over "excellent" to "extraordinary."

"Mr. Wine and his chef, Noel Comess, are unfettered by tradition but well schooled in the techniques of the classic' kitchen," the review said. "They skillfully orchestrate the flavors and textures of a half-dozen cuisines to produce dishes that are uniquely American because they are an amalgam of so many different cultures."

The Wines were not surprised by the four-star rating.

"I think it did more for our customers, the people who had been telling us for so long that this was as good as any restaurant anywhere," Barry Wine says. "It confirmed their judgment."

A tour of the restaurant doesn’t take long. There are only seven tables upstairs and 12 downstairs. The restau-