

---

# Educating Alice

Alice Steinbach

## Chapter 1

### COOKIN' AT THE RITZ

A light snow was falling as I left my hotel and hurried across the narrow rue Cambon to the employees' entrance of the Hotel Ritz. It surprised me that I had learned only two days earlier that such a door even existed. How, I wondered, in all my years of exploring the streets and passages of Paris had I missed it? After all, back doors were a major interest of mine. And so were side doors and courtyards hidden behind green gates and anything else that concealed the private Paris from me. Once, I spent two years writing letters and making phone calls before being allowed to visit the mysterious Maison de Verre, a house on the Left Bank designed in the late 1920s by the French architect Pierre Chareau. Compared to that heroic effort, gaining entrance to the back door of the Hotel Ritz was a snap: I had simply enrolled as a culinary student in the Ritz Escoffier École de Gastronomie Française.

Now here I was, on a snowy morning in February, about to enter the hotel not as an outsider but as an insider, a thrilling prospect. After all, I told myself, anyone willing and able to pay seven hundred dollars a pop to stay overnight could walk through the Ritz's imposing place Vendôme entrance. But only those carrying an employee's identification card were allowed through the back door on rue Cambon. Still, as eager as I was to begin what seemed an adventure, the truth is I was nervous about what to expect on the other side of the door. A French security officer who would turn me away? A snooty chef who would laugh at my limited French vocabulary? Classmates who would criticize my chopping and dicing techniques? A sudden, humiliating announcement from the school's Directeur that, for undisclosed reasons, he had revoked my student status?

It was in this Kafkaesque frame of mind that I pushed open the plain unmarked door and stepped into a small vestibule. A security guard sitting in a small room behind a counter stood up and carefully gave me the once-over. Immediately his stern appraising demeanor made me think of my root canal dentist.

'Bonjour,' I said with fake nonchalance, holding out my photo ID in such a way that my thumb covered any evidence of a very bad haircut. He nodded and reached for the card. I watched as he looked at it and frowned. Was it my bad haircut that

offended? 'Is something wrong?' I asked. His response was to look at my face and then at the photo, comparing the two. He repeated this twice. Face-then-photo. Face-then-photo. Just as I started to explain that I'd drastically altered my hairstyle - for the better - since the photo was taken, a buzzer went off. A clicking sound followed as the gate to the long basement corridor unlocked and, with a wave of his hand, the guard motioned me through.

So this was it, then, the moment when I became a part of the venerable Hotel Ritz. After descending a flight of stairs, I looked down a corridor so long I couldn't see the end of it. What I could see, however, was a small army of employees engaged in a whirlwind of activity. Fascinated, I watched as men in crisp white uniforms picked up crates containing hundreds of bottles of Evian water and florists pushed carts filled with lavish arrangements of lilies, tulips, and irises. As I moved deeper into the corridor I saw workmen carting off worn pieces of Persian rugs and cabinetmakers moving a hand-painted Chinese chest marked 'For repair.' Service staff carrying covered silver breakfast trays entered and exited the service elevator. Some of the employees nodded to me in a collegial way as they passed by. I nodded back, trying to conceal my excitement at witnessing all the daily routines necessary to run a world-class hotel.

I continued on through the long corridor, past the sparkling white tile and stainless-steel kitchen classrooms of the cooking school, to the locker rooms where students changed into their uniforms. After a few minutes of struggling with the key, I unlocked the door on the right marked 'Women.' When I opened it a blast of hot, steamy air hit me; it smelled like the warm dampness I breathed as a child when changing clothes in the locker room of the YWCA pool.

Inside the small, L-shaped room there were thirty-five bright blue lockers, a few narrow benches, and an adjoining space with a toilet, a shower stall, two sinks, and a mirror. On a small table in the corner someone had left a hair comb and a large roll of Tums - a bad omen, perhaps, to find in the locker room of a cooking school. After locating the locker assigned to me - Number 210 - I opened it and saw hanging inside the uniform I'd been fitted for on the previous day. The room was empty so I began to undress quickly, hoping to finish suiting up before my classmates arrived. Call me insecure, but I preferred not to meet my colleagues for the first time wearing only my underwear.

The uniform was formidable. First, I removed the sturdy closed-toe shoes students were advised to wear and stepped out of my khaki pants. Then I pulled on a pair of heavy cotton houndstooth-check trousers. My sweater came off next. It was replaced by a starched white double-breasted chef's jacket with double rows of buttons and

---

the name of the school embroidered in blue on the left. Then came the napkinlike neckerchief that had to be tied in a very specific way. Next, I wrapped a starched white apron around my waist, tied it in front, and then tucked a thick white side towel under the apron string on my left side. By this time I was perspiring heavily.

Finally it was time to don the flat, starched white hat worn by students. I approached the hat with some trepidation. I still had not gotten over the humiliation of being told by the sympathetic French laundress who fitted me that I would require a very large hat. 'A size 21,' she said sadly. 'There is no larger.' Also I had no idea of how to wear this hat. Pushed back on my head like a beanie with hair showing? Or pulled down over my forehead, just above the eyebrows? Either way, it was not a becoming look. I decided to wear it in the more severe position: very low on my forehead, almost to my eyebrows, with all my hair covered. Somehow, it seemed more professional that way.

I looked at my watch; it had taken twenty minutes to suit up. I made a brief detour to the mirror and stopped to stare at myself. The person staring back, the one who was supposed to resemble a culinary student, looked in fact like a Red Army nurse, circa World War II. Actually I sort of liked the look. I fancied myself as looking very much like the Hemingway heroine in *A Farewell to Arms*, despite the fact she wasn't Russian and the story had nothing to do with World War II.

To complete the uniform I pinned on the nametag, which, I had been warned at my fitting, 'should in all cases be worn every day.'