

STEVE BOGART

And the Tale of A Single Pebble

By Debbie Salomon for "Vermont Life" - Autumn 2003

In another life, chef Steve Bogart must have been Chinese.

Observe Bogart, a Worcester resident, selecting lo bok gau and che chang fun at a dim sum palace in Montreal. Watch him rap the table with two fingers after tea is poured - a Chinese gesture of appreciation. Marvel at his dexterity with chopsticks, his level of comfort in an all-Asian setting.

Outwardly, he conforms to Vermont stereotypes: barrel chest, ruddy complexion, salt-and-pepper hair, the plaid shirt and work boots of a logger - which he was, as well as a carpenter, house painter and postman during the hippie 1960s in Plainfield.

The 55-year-old chef/co-owner of A Single Pebble restaurants in Berlin (Barre-Montpelier) and Burlington is, quite simply, a convergence. For 25 years, Bogart has given the land of milk and maple something not available between Boston and Montreal: authentic Chinese banquet food.

Flavor & Fortune magazine, "dedicated to the art and science of Chinese cuisine," calls Bogart's effort "worthy of any Chinatown ... in an Asian-barren region."

Well, not quite. Vermont has enough Chinese restaurants serving deep-fried, same-sauced, meat-laden dishes from brightly lit buffets. Although he doesn't wish to offend, Bogart recoils, politely. "Not only is the food very unauthentic, but it's what Westerners think Chinese people eat," he says.

His friend and devotee Dr. Mark Allen of Walden understands the difference between such fare and Bogart's creations: "I had a Chinese friend who once invited me to a traditional meal at his home. The food was very similar to Steve's."

Similar enough that when David Rockefeller hosted 35 Chinese dignitaries at his Tarrytown, New York, estate in 1992, Bogart was summoned to cater. His menu included abalone, sea cucumber, sow's ears, tripe, stuffed intestines - definitely not your No. 4 dinner for six.

"David didn't tell them a Westerner was cooking the food," Bogart recalls. "After the formal banquet, he brought me into the dining room. Everyone was shocked."

The guests applauded, he admits when pressed. Following Chinese custom, Bogart resists calling attention to himself.

No need. His boosters include playwright David Mamet, a part-time Cabot resident, and *New Yorker* magazine cartoonist Ed Koren, who lives in Brookfield. Chris Barbieri, the Asian trade representative for the Vermont Chamber of Commerce, who has visited China regularly for the past 10 years and now works in Shanghai, says: "Steve has done a remarkable job of capturing the essence of Chinese culinary arts. He has it down pat."

The modest chef's career path winds like the Great Wall from New Jersey tree surgeon to outpost restaurateur. In 1997 on a commercial strip opposite a bowling alley on the Barre-Montpelier Road, he and partner Phil Gentile opened A Single Pebble, named after John Hersey's novella about a boat expedition on the Yangtze River. The restaurant's soothing celadon-green interior duplicates Bogart's favorite restaurant in Beijing. In 2002, the partners branched out to open their second restaurant in a charming downtown row house on Bank Street in Burlington.

Don't even think about showing up at either Pebble on weekends without a reservation. Even Martha Stewart knew she needed to call ahead after a day filming ice fishing on Joe's Pond.

Exquisite though it is - lemon sesame shrimp, squirrel fish, barbecue hanging pork, Sea of China Soup, mock eel and Red Pine Chicken -Bogart's food, his friends insist, pales beside its roughhewn creator.

"The restaurant is irrelevant. The notion of Steve as a cook, and his interest in China, is so secondary to the type of person he is -thoughtful, considerate. Steve is a very organic human being," says Dr. Rodger Kessler, a Stowe psychologist and friend for 25 years.

Organic human beings spring from deep roots. Picture small-town Allendale, New Jersey, in the late 1950s. Dads, including Bogart's, commuted to executive positions in Manhattan. Moms kept house. Once a week, families ate Chinese at the Cathay - just your ordinary neighborhood place with red lanterns and numbered items.

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For this impressionable child, however, the Cathay became a portal. It wasn't so much the food that intrigued me," Bogart says (although he remembers eating egg foo yung in first grade). "It was the texture of the restaurant, the people who ran it, the mysteriousness, like a secret, very old society. I was fascinated; I had to know more."

When he was 9, a friend moved back to Allendale after spending several years in Hong Kong. Bogart hung around his pal's house, practically inhaling the furniture. About this time, he found a paperback cookbook, half English, half Chinese. Now, instead of watching his mother cook meatloaf, he could attempt Chinese preparations.

From the beginning, Bogart, youngest of three sons, cooked with the passion other boys reserve for baseball. He remains clueless about sports, but initiate a discussion of philosophy and his blue eyes sparkle, then deepen.

Bogart admits to a privileged, culturally rich childhood. His family went to Saturday performances at the Metropolitan Opera, followed by meals in Chinatown.

His, father studied the precepts of Russian philosopher Georges Gurdjieff, who taught self-observation as a way of living a harmonious life.

Yet young Steve was no bookworm. Instead, he learned tree surgery from a neighbor and by high school graduation was earning \$500 a week pruning for the rich and famous, including Richard Nixon.

With such a lucrative profession, why go to college? Why not grow his hair and take off for California with his girlfriend, Deborah Poore, in a VW bus, like the rest of the anti-Vietnam War protesters, the counter-culturists? His father did not object; he saw his son's self-sufficiency as Gurdjieffian.

California brought Bogart closer to Chinese food and closer to Deborah, whom he had known since elementary school. They had walked home together in fourth grade, talking of becoming veterinarians, and they are soul mates in all but culinary matters (she's a strict vegetarian specializing in Indian dishes).

After California, the couple searched for a region with distinct seasons, somewhere they could marry and live simply, apart from commercialism. "I brought Steve to Vermont," says Deborah, who discovered the state while attending Goddard College in Plainfield.

Steve put \$7,000 of his tree-surgery money into 40 acres in Marshfield. The fit wasn't right. Eventually, the Bogarts traded the land for a hillside parcel in Worcester, where they built a cabinlike house with a tiny kitchen and got involved in their town. Steve worked at a variety of manual labors and has been a local tax assessor for 20 years. Deborah ran a daycare. They had two sons.

Through it all, in his spare time Steve cooked and studied, cooked and experimented, cooked and invited friends.

How fortunate those friends. In the early 1970s, Bogart was enticed to open an underground restaurant, The Wok & I, in a friend's living room. Every weekend for two summers, friends packed the eight tables. Every week, Steve drove to Boston for ingredients. "I figured it cost me about \$100 a night to cook," he says. "But money has never been my main goal. I do it because of the fascination."

Fascination became occupation in the mid-1980s when Bogart converted a bread truck into a mobile kitchen and began catering. Now, as then, the sought after gypsy caterer insisted on cooking the classic way, combining the basic nine ingredients of Chinese cuisine (garlic, ginger, scallions, soy, sesame oil, sugar salt, cornstarch and wine) in ways new to Western palates. Besides private functions, Bogart worked briefly at China Moon in Sugarbush Village and Topnotch in Stowe - but he has only trained with one Chinese chef, in California.

Business acumen wasn't among Bogart's talents, but partnerships with Phil Gentile and others finally enabled him to realize his dream: A Single Pebble.

Other dreams have also come true. In 1984, the man who had never been abroad visited China for the first time on an American Culinary Federation jaunt.

"I remember flying into Shanghai at dusk. I got goose bumps. All the things I had heard about were right there beneath me. It felt like I was going home," Bogart says, then flashes the famous milewide smile.

The best chefs had fled the oppressive regime, and Bogart found food quality marginal, but during long walks at dawn, he absorbed atmosphere like eggplant soaks up oil. "I can only go so long without being surrounded by Chinese people," he realized. "I get very charged in a Chinatown because their entire culture is based around food. They don't just run in and grab something for dinner. They go through every mound of cabbage, with reverence. In China, eating out is a calming, nurturing experience."

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Bogart returned with a group in 1994, as guests of the Chinese government a gratuity for work done with the U.S.-China Friendship Association. The food was better - and Bogart was able to sail John Hersey's route on the Yangtze.

His own journey has been slow and arduous. He studies language, culture and cuisine through schools, books, videos and travel. He keeps a loft in New York's Chinatown. He still drives to Boston for ingredients and to Montreal for lunch. After a grueling evening over the restaurant's wok stove, he returns home and picks up a cookbook.

"I get the idea that the immersion [in cooking] brings him peace, contentment and joy," * Mark Allen says.

The fire still burns in Steve Bogart, with sparks flying in new directions.

"Julia Child says old chefs make great teachers," Bogart notes. When he has the time, he hopes to write a cookbook, one that draws on his decades of experience rather than on official culinary credentials. "At times I've felt looked down upon," he says. "I'm not Chinese; I didn't attend culinary school."

But, on a rocky rural hillside in Worcester, Bogart has built a temple to his dreams - a pagoda, modeled after the first structure on the Great Wall. This is his storehouse, his unheated workshop, his gallery. Forty-four spent woks hang from the rafters, forming a mobile sculpture. The siding is painted red – Chinese red, not barn red, Bogart says. Someday, he may convert it to a restaurant. The chef flashes a conspiratorial smile. "I'll call it A Single Table."

Chinese Delights

Dinner at A Single Pebble is a singular experience.

The row house on a quiet downtown Burlington side street is reminiscent of brownstone residences in Boston, Montreal and New York. Some of the soothing, celadon-green interior is divided into alcoves. Round tables are topped by lacquered lazy Susans made by Bogart in his Worcester pagoda/barn.

On a bustling Friday evening, the informally dressed (yet sophisticated) diners look both expectant and smug: "We're here, we're ready," they seem to say. "Now show us your stuff."

Bogart's stuff is unrelated to numbered Chinese dishes that Americans consume from wire-handled boxes. It doesn't even sound the same: Red Pine Chicken (braised through a layer of star anise-perfumed ground pork) on a bed of spinach; watercress salad; squirrel fish; forest shrimp and fiery dry-fried green beans. Mock eel, Bogart's crispy salty-sweet shiitake-mushroom dish, was described by a customer as "better than sex."

Bogart chuckles, "I put a lot of passion into what I do."

Diners can tell. Chuck Tobin, of Burlington, managing director of St. Michael's Playhouse, is more familiar with Americanized Chinese food which heightened his experience at the Pebble: "It was like an adventure, like traveling a million miles away from everything I'm used to," he says.

I joined Steve and Deborah Bogart at a table near the bar, a lovely piece of woodwork crafted from paneled doors found in the residence during remodeling.

The server, dressed in classic black and white, set down a dish of complimentary pickled vegetables, then reeled off the specials. The radish cake appetizer rang a bell.

"Remember - we had this at Kam Fung in Montreal," Bogart said, explaining the process: He makes flour from soaked rice, adds grated daikon radish, Chinese bacon and sausage, then forms the mixture into a loaf that is steamed, chilled, sliced and wok-fried.

He divides his time between the year old Burlington restaurant and the original Barre-Montpelier Pebble. But, following the Chinese practice of shunning attention, he rarely leaves his kitchen to mingle with guests.

The menu is divided into soups, small dishes, medium dishes, big dishes, noodle and vegetable dishes. Prices are startlingly moderate - big dishes range from under \$10 to about \$15. The temptation is to order three or four small dishes, including dumplings, spring rolls, watercress salad and one noodle dish, perhaps Ants Climbing a Tree. Really, the temptation is to order everything, to experience all the subtle flavors, the contrasting textures in Bogart's "palace cuisine" adapted from his favorite restaurant in Beijing, which offers dishes once served to royalty.

Bogart ate everything with chopsticks. I needed a fork to cut the radish cake and Red Pine Chicken. Even so, I made a mess; I'm uncomfortable lifting the bowl closer to my mouth, or lowering my mouth to the bowl, as Chinese manners allow. However, each morsel was so delectable I wanted to lick the plate.

For dessert we shared Bogart's only bow to the West: a sesame tuile basket filled with coconut ice cream and drizzled with, oh, yes, chocolate sauce.

This was a special evening, a taste of the right stuff, plus a glimpse of Steve Bogart's world through cracks in the Great Wall. Warmed by tea and conversation, I walked out into the chilly night feeling not only satisfied but, well, smug.

A Single Pebble, 133 Bank Street, Burlington, open daily from 5 p.m., (802) 865-5200.

A Single Pebble, Barre-Montpelier Road, Berlin, (Route 302, next to Twin City Lanes), Tuesday-Sunday, 5-9 p.m., (802) 476-9700.

Walk-ins are welcome, but reservations are recommended.