

From that event, it grew in my mind: if I could win this competition in this uniform, I would want to wear one for the rest of my life.

Thus, a lifelong passion to be a cook and don the uniform that accompanies the job was born.

I resumed my education at a Catholic school in Bellingham, near Crystal Palace in Southeast London, and progressed to a Technical College until fifteen.

It was seriously very difficult, especially as I was not academically inclined, nor well-educated in my formative years. This was compounded by the uprooting of my family, but I was blessed with a bit of intelligence and a guardian angel on my back.

I commenced an apprenticeship in cookery at the Cumberland Hotel London in 1956. At the time, the Cumberland Hotel was one of the last of a dying breed of grand classical hotels with very conservative clients. It was probably the last of the classical style of kitchens, standing alongside other iconic English classic hotels like The Savoy and The Dorchester.

I worked in the Silver Grill of the Cumberland, a kitchen that had a staff of 60, including 17 apprentices. All food orders were called in French, and all the sous chefs (or senior chefs) were French.

I still remember my first day. It was very confusing, if not frightening, to enter a commercial kitchen; however, wasn't this my dream come true?

I distinctly remember entering the kitchen full of anxiety about the future, feeling as though I was walking towards my gallows. Moreover, I was wearing an oversized cook's coat, a floppy white hat, and a necktie that seemed impossible to tie neatly around my neck. As I entered the kitchen, I had to nervously walk past a small office with windows positioned so whoever was inside had a full view of the kitchen.

It was then I heard my very first terrifying words: "Eh boy, fermez la porte, s'il vous plaît." Not understanding French added to the apprehension, and in a panic, I desperately tried to straighten my necktie, believing this to be the command issued from a short, impeccably dressed chef in a full white cook's uniform and tall white hat; only to see him burst out laughing as he said in English with a French accent, "Boy, I said close the fridge door."

I worked with a multicultural group of cooks, not fully as we understand the word today, but still a gathering of many different nationalities. There were French sous chefs, Polish, German, Egyptian, Dutch, Swiss, and English chef de parties, to name a few, all with a fundamental dislike for any nationality other than their own.

As an apprentice, I had very little social life, earning 2.15 pounds a week, and was simply called "Boy."

In my third year of apprenticeship, I received an invitation to a school reunion from my previous Catholic school parish priest and attended. To my utter amazement, I met a gorgeous-looking fellow student named Jean and immediately fell head over heels in love with her.

We courted the old-fashioned way for nearly three years and got married. After living in a rented attic, we soon realized that England offered a dismal future for both of us, especially as Jean was a commercial graphic artist and I was a cook with very little to survive on and next to no future.

So, we decided to look elsewhere. Canada, South Africa, and Australia were all seeking immigrants, and because Australia was the first to respond with an offer, obviously with the huge influence of my angel, we decided to emigrate to this glorious country, aiming to stay only two years.