

SOMOZA AND SNAILS IN MANAGUA

Our Man in Nicaragua reports on the sad effects of an ongoing revolution on an already shaky cuisine.

Managua's Only French Restaurant

By Richard Elman

There used to be one pretty good French restaurant in Managua, Nicaragua, called La Gauloise, just like the cigarette, in a residential part of town, on a quiet street, opposite the home of the Inspector General for Aqueducts, Debayle Martinez.

It wasn't a very large place, the front parlor of a private home, and it was very expensive for Nicaragua: nothing, not even the soups, cost less than 30 cordobas (\$4).

The owner, Alain Marie, was a former merchant seaman from Brittany who'd "married" one of the local women, and gone into the food business. He was quite successful for a while. A lot of top government people and generals turned up for dinner with their wives and girlfriends; and his regular customers also included Robelo, leader of the middle-class Broad Opposition Front to the Somoza government, other prominent businessmen, most of the foreign press corps when it was there, and a certain well-known writer of *belles lettres* who was said to be, in some way, close to the Sandinistan rebels.

La Gauloise was declared neutral territory after the shooting started up. You could eat there feeling almost as if you were on French soil. Enemies sat in different parts of the room, aware of each other, even as they nodded over their plates of snails with garlic. Nobody ever hassled anybody while they were eating at La Gauloise, but there were often squads of elite Black Beret soldiers and pro-government paramilitary thugs posted on the dark streets nearby to intercept certain diners leaving the place. For that reason, Alain Marie, the *patron*, would often allow clandestines and politicians to exit by his kitchen door in the back of the house.

Richard Elman, the author of eight novels, including *Fredi & Shirl & the Kids*, is writing a book of stories about his experiences in Nicaragua while on assignment for *Geo Magazine* in 1978. The working title of his book is, "Scenes from a National Mutiny."

"I am a *restaurateur*, not a politician," Alain Marie would explain, "and I need to keep every customer I have. I don't want to lose you. I don't want to lose any of you. Believe me."

But everybody suspected he was a rebel sympathizer. People even said his wife's sister was a girlfriend of the rebel Tomas Borge.

That was never proved to my satisfaction. I believe Alain Marie was, in the true sense of the term, an "accommodating person"; and he was hoping to accommodate his facilities and menu to whichever regime took power.

French people are sometimes like that, I suppose. I divide them into roughly two distinct classes: those who are hearty and accommodating, and those who are mean. Alain Marie was not a very good cook; he covered everything he made with garlic, and tomatoes and then labeled it "*a la provençal*," or he daubed it over with a white cream sauce and insisted that was a *bernaise*; but he always tried to be open, friendly, hospitable, generous with his portions. It wasn't his fault the ruling Somoza dynasty had such heavy import duties on wines and spirits that an ordinary bottle of claret cost the customer \$20. He made the least of his profits from wines. He served French wines because his customers insisted on it; and most could afford to pay the going price.

Everybody had been lining their pocket, in Managua for years off what was and what was not available, and for how much; so, whenever you complained about his prices, like a true citizen of his adopted country, Alain Marie would shrug his shoulders and blame it all on the Somoza family, particularly Tacho, the dictator.

Fair enough!

The new 10 per cent tax on restaurant service wasn't going into Alain Marie's pockets.

Nor did he get a share of the heavy new taxes on his canned snail shells.

Sombody had to pay for this war. The Somozas wouldn't, so the Nicas did, rich and poor, on both sides of the political battle.

And Alain Marie had plenty of his own headaches. He, too, was being exploited: By the army captains and lieutenants and majors who ate meals in his place in combat dress wearing sidearms and then demanded complimentary service.

When the curfew came into effect, he had very few customers left, and started closing at seven-thirty in the evening, so people could be home before eight, the hour when his place was normally jumping.

Then there happened to be, just coincidentally, his wife's miscarriage, and his son's school closed by the general strike for weeks; his daughter was not accepted into the rhythmical gymnastics team; it was harder and harder to get decent fresh provisions; and his farm, near Jinotepe, lost its

coffee crop when the frightened migratory laborers refused to come up north from Rivas. He was going broke; his big white Citroen, identical to Tachito's, the Boss' son's, was more or less permanently disabled for lack of spare parts. He had labor troubles, a bleeding hemorrhoid, an errant girlfriend, and that was just the start of all his griefs....

Alain Marie wore a worried face like some people crown their heads with blow-dried hair styles. His business fears gave him an increasingly dry look, a pasty face.

You'd be eating supper, and he would come over to your table to give you his host's greeting, and what you also got then, compulsively, inadvertently, were complaints, harangues, shoulder shruggings, and proprietary curses.

It wasn't good for the digestion, or proper enjoyment of his mediocre cuisine, so then Alain Marie would always add: "Ah well monsieur, it is these *bims* [bombs], and the bastards who run this place. You know. It's terrible...."

"Of course...."

"*Bien sur*," he would add: "That coward Somoza...." But, two tables away, might be seated a high minister of the government and a couple of hookers, so that it almost seemed to be Alain Marie's intention to be overheard, with the press as his only witnesses and shield.

One night during the battle for Leon, I was having a late supper at La Gauloise with a photographer from *Time*, and Alain Marie came specially over to our table to offer us each a glass of *eau-de-vie* on the house.

I asked how things were with him.

"Perfecto!"

"You seemed very worried two nights ago," the woman from *Time* reminded him. "Why should I not?" he demanded resuming his customarily haggard air: "This war will destroy everything. Look at my



Illustration by Jim Kautent

restaurant. Aside from you there is only a man from the police having dinner here tonight...."

He stared with us at a table at the far end of the room where a tiny pale man with a pencil mustache bent over his heaping plate of stew, as if he had cramps.

"Alain," I asked, "what's so perfect about that?"

He replied, "My friend, for me this is a perfect disaster, no?"

He told us then in a whisper the fellow had appeared every night in the week for his supper at this hour "and because of him I must stay open...."

"*What about us?*" asked my woman friend.

"You don't do this," said Alain Marie, making a slitting gesture with his finger across his throat.

The cop was masticating on a large chunk of pork.

Again Alain Marie whispered, "Coward."

"Cool it," we said. As if he didn't know that. He really didn't seem to wish to any longer.

When we came back to La Gauloise a few nights later the restaurant was closed for business. A hand-lettered sign on the massive wooden front door stipulated: "Due to the current emergency, La Gauloise can no longer provide service."

We were disappointed: even though the food wasn't that good, it was a place to go to, to get away from the hotel, and the gossip, and all the government spies in the lobby. I felt so much more a prisoner in Nicaragua for having been denied the possibility of further meals at La Gauloise but I went on with my work and my life and really thought no more of Alain Marie and his problems until the day after the government had bombed and strafed the people of Esteli in the north, so that the town was retaken. The following morning I went to the airport to find a "pigeon" who could smuggle out some copy for me. The Somozas had just pulled the plug on the communications satellite, disconnected the telex, and imposed complete press censorship. No news was supposed to leave Managua without government approval. I didn't trust the phones so I had to use pigeons.

A rather cute-looking blonde Mormon girl from the Peace Corps was flying to Miami and she agreed to take my sealed envelope and give it to our man on the other side of the Customs Desk. I felt pretty smart about what I had done, and was just about to boogie my way back to the hotel when I saw Alain Marie.

He stood in a pale flaccid sweat on the Pan Am standby line which was no line at all, but a crush, a mob scene.

He was all by himself. He had just two smart Saint Laurent suitcases, and a parka suit jacket with the lining turned out across his forearm.

He was leaving Nicaragua, without a

family. I didn't ask why, when he waved his fingers discreetly in my direction.

"So nice of you to come," he said, reaching out to hug me to his sweaty shirt-front.

I complied, but just barely, and then he added: "I understand. It is *not* pleasant waiting here."

I inquired if he planned to be away a long time.

"Forever," he crooned. "Always and forever...."

"And your...people?" I inquired, not wishing to get too personal.

Alain Marie said, "Ask President Somoza."

Again he shrugged.

He didn't seem that uncomfortable about running out; he was a Frenchman and could, ~~Nicas~~ have a more difficult time bribing officials for their passports.

Probably he could do more for his family from outside the border, I thought.

So I asked what he planned to do with all his property, the restaurant, the house and car, the cases of wine and spirits.

Again Alain Marie gave me that drenching fat glazed look, a look of sadness and passivity, and said, more fiercely, "Ask Tacho Somoza...."

"You will go back to France?"

"It is unlikely," he observed. "There I am not such a good chef...."

"Where then?"

"Perhaps I shall become a rebel...."

"Don't make jokes, Alain," I said, as loudly as possible.

He glanced about to make sure he was not being overheard and said, "In El Salvador I could be a good French chef...

"You know," he winked, "in El Salvador a good French chef from Nicaragua is considered a genius...."

"Of that I am certain," I told him. "But there ~~is~~ terror there, too, and the White Hand. In the end the same things may happen there...."

"*Claro*," went Alain Marie. He nodded briskly at me with his chin as a big bead of sweat dripped down off of it.

"In the meantime," he said then, "we live this way, people like us...."

"The fortunes of war," I said.

"*Oui perfecto*," went Alain Marie.

I said goodbye, and wished him luck. I knew he would need it. To be an itinerant in the middle of a revolution is bad enough; being less than a genius at what you do makes it even worse.

I hoped no dissatisfied customer in San Salvador blew him away after a meal, but I felt he would probably get by, in the meantime, as he had been doing all his life: by accommodating.

My little pigeon never showed up in Miami with my copy.

She thought I was a Communist spy, or a dangerous terrorist, so she turned it over to an airline captain who gave it to the Somozan government. ■