



Beginners' Luck

A decade ago, Suzanne Roll helped lay groundwork for fine Ojai cuisine

*Lisa McKinnon, Star Arts&Living
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When she's planning the menu for her namesake Ojai restaurant, Suzanne Roll scours no fewer than three farmers markets a week for fresh produce and ideas.

It's a habit she doesn't seem able to kick: During a three-week vacation last month outside the French town of Toulouse, Roll stocked the kitchen of her rented old farmhouse with fall street-market offerings ranging from fresh anchovies and cepes, the pale brown wild mushrooms, to quail sold with their tiny heads tied under their wings and the oysters she bought—and then had to shuck—two dozens at a time.

“How can you not want to cook when you have all that fresh stuff?” asked Roll, 61, for whom the trip became a chef's holiday of menu planning and preparation for a group that included her numbers-crunching, portion size-watching business partner from back home: daughter Sandra Moore, 35.

Even Moore—the financially minded half of the mother-daughter team that runs Suzanne's Cuisine—luxuriated in the food-oriented pace.

“Going out to look at the countryside and then gathering around the table together as a family to eat ... that's a wonderful tradition,” she said. “There is a rejuvenating quality in being in a place where life is a lot more simple.”

Reinvigorated if not necessarily rested by the trip, Roll and Moore on Friday will celebrate the 10th anniversary of their restaurant—and of a partnership that is remarkable even in the family-centric world of independent restaurants.

Husband-and-wife pairings are common in the business (witness Wolfgang Puck and Barbara Lazaroff, who collaborated on Spago Hollywood even before they said “I do”). So are father-son match-ups. But mother-daughter combinations are comparatively rare.

Is that because the hours required to run a restaurant are not conducive to raising a family? Perhaps. But Moore makes a more specific point: “Not very many 60-year-old women have the energy of my mom,” she said with a laugh. “It’s a very physically demanding career with long hours spent on your feet, heave-hoing cases of *whatever*.”

It works, Moore said, because the duties have been divvied up according to their respective talents. Moore keeps the bills paid, the staff trained and the restaurant organized. “My mother is the creative side, with the flair for food and details—to the degree that she will joke that she doesn’t know what’s in our bank account.”

Like childbirth, the specific pains Roll and Moore went through to open one of Ojai’s most respected restaurants have become a little foggy with the passing years.

For Roll, the project began when she saw a modest white duplex for sale on Ojai Avenue during a visit to the Upper Ojai ranch she and husband Richard Roll, a professor of finance at UCLA, had bought about four years earlier. The house’s proximity to downtown Ojai made it a likely location for the small restaurant Roll dreamed of one day opening.

“I thought it would be like having a dinner party for 25 or 30 people, just with help,” she said laughing. “Looking back now, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Moore, who earned her master's degree in business administration at the University of Chicago, was working as a senior corporate finance manager for Sears when she offered to visit Ojai for a couple of months in order to get the new restaurant's computer system up and running.

She arrived to find that the cement had been poured for the parking lot but that not much else was happening. She also discovered that Roll was carrying important business papers around in a basket on the back seat of her car.

Moore, who spent two summers in the mid-'80s working as an assistant manager at the Santa Monica restaurant Rockenwagner, drew up a to-do calendar that helped move the creation of the menu along. Somewhere along the way, her "two months in Ojai" turned into 10 years.

"I always knew I wanted to work for myself; I just didn't know it would be in the restaurant business," Moore said with another laugh.

It's all in the timing

Both women remember that Suzanne's Cuisine had reservations on opening night, and it seemed to take forever to get the food out of the kitchen and onto the tables.

That was a problem.

"In French fine dining, you're there for the evening," Roll said. "Americans expect to get their food yesterday."

Joining Roll in the kitchen at the time were a couple of line cooks and the French-trained chef she'd met during the experimental month she spent working at the fish station of a restaurant in the seventh *arrondissement* of Paris.

In preparation for the opening of Suzanne's Cuisine, "we drew pictures of the plated with arrows showing what was supposed to go where, and then we taped the pictures above the pass-through," Roll recalled. "For the first week, we'd look up at the picture, down at the food, up at the picture—heads bobbing up and down. It was hysterical."

"I remember one of the guys saying, 'Someday, you'll do 60 dinners,'" added Roll, whose kitchen staff now includes *chef de cuisine* Max Soriano. "And I thought, 'We'll never do 60.' Now we do 60 and it's, 'Oh, it's slow tonight.'"

"In the beginning, you're struggling so hard that if someone sends something back to the kitchen, it's like a knife to your heart," said Moore, recalling the days she and Roll kept a twin bed in the office for the all-too-frequent occasions they were too tired—or to busy—to drive home. "Having achieved some success ... it's easier now to be gracious and to consistently give the service we want each person to experience here."

In the first few years, Roll insisted on baking all of the restaurant's bread and arranging flowers for each of the 20-plus tables—the sort of attention to detail that meant she often didn't leave until about the same time the morning staff arrived to start preparing for lunch.

Today, the bread is made elsewhere according to Roll's specifications but she still arranges the flowers and pulls the occasional all-nighter in anticipation of major dining-out holidays like Valentine's Day.

"I have this problem: (I know) I can do it better and cheaper," Roll said. Case in Point: Rather than hire outside help, Roll catered her daughter's October 2000 wedding to executive recruiter Lee Moore at the family's ranch. She also baked the chocolate five-tier cake (which she decorated with real and chocolate roses) and sewed her mother-of-the-bride dress of bronze-olive crushed velvet. The festivities, along with recipes for three different *hors d'oeuvres*, were documented in a six-page spread of the May 2001 issue of *More* magazine.

‘Is Suzanne here?’

Given the restaurant’s name, it’s not surprising that patrons routinely come in asking after “Suzanne.” But Roll isn’t big on the cheffy tradition of making tableside visits.

“I’m not shy,” she said. “I just don’t know what to say.”

Diners who haven’t already met Roll might be surprised by her appearance, which bears little resemblance to the stereotype of a chef—particularly one who likes to add cream to her soups, French-style. Her white chef’s coat swims on her slender frame, and diamond rings shimmer on her fingers, just waiting to be caked in flour.

But the marks of true chefdom are there when you peel back the surface: On Roll’s legs are scars from the time a hot oven door fell open onto them. Her chest, she said, is marked by the reminders of hot-oil splatters.

“When I’m in my coffin, people will say, ‘What was she—a bricklayer?’”

Roll and Moore are credited by foodies with helping lay the foundation for fine cuisine in the Ojai Valley—but you won’t catch either of them saying so. Instead, their advertisements make use of glowing quotes from a handful of influential publications: An incognito scribe for the Zagat Survey called Suzanne’s Cuisine “*Chez Panisse in Ventura County*” while *Gourmet* magazine said the food is “made of love.”

As with many things in Roll’s life, her interest in food can be traced back to family. Photographic evidence can be found on the mantle over the fireplace—the same fireplace by which former Ojai resident Ellen DeGeneres was seen enjoying a post-Anne Heche dinner date. The slightly blurry, hand-tinted image is of Roll’s paternal uncle Angelo and his wife, Rose, the woman Roll calls “the best cook in the world.”

Aunt Rose's recipe for meatballs is just one of the comfort foods featured on the menu along with dishes that mirror Roll's family history and world travels: pan-seared ahi with fresh and dried fruit ginger salsa, port medallions with cambozola, peaches and brown sauce, and fettucini with portabella mushrooms, asparagus, sun-dried tomatoes, arugula and a goat cheese truffle sauce.

Roll's path from home cook to restaurant chef was a circuitous one. After graduating from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland with a degree in home economics, she worked as a food technologist in the dairy and poultry division for Wilson Meat Co., helping develop frozen-food variations on dishes like chicken Kiev.

Then came motherhood (Roll also has a son, Matthew, 32, a multicultural marketing expert for Ford Motor Co.), followed by stints as a kitchen designer for architect Paul Bailly and as a showroom manager for a French importing company in Los Angeles. (Roll and Moore both are fluent in French, thanks to time spent living in Europe in the 1970s.)

Now she is passing along her love of food to the next generation. Grandson Edwin, 4, likes to bake and offers to help in the kitchen without prompting by adults. And joining in on the French farmhouse vacation were Moore's daughters Jessica, 6, and Madeleine, 14 months.

"The first time she saw a baguette, she started to scream," Roll said of the aptly named Madeleine. "Then she devoured it."