

JAMES BARBER, 84: EPICURE

Obituaries

Cooking-show host was known as the Urban Peasant

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VICTORIA -- James Barber called himself the Urban Peasant -- "a cook, not a chef," he would insist -- whose cause it was to show the world the joys of simple food simply prepared.

Cooking should not be a grind, or a chore; rather, it should be a joyous, sensuous and celebratory event, followed by the greater pleasure of eating. As an affable television host, he spread his message across the globe. The Urban Peasant, which was shown on CBC television for 10 years, has become a broadcast staple in more than 80 countries.

As a cookbook author, Mr. Barber wrote a dozen guides that could make the worst kitchen klutz capable of producing a fine three-course meal. He thought this could be done even on a small boat in a galley stocked with a single frying pan.

The approach he took was in contrast to many other television chefs, who presented themselves as extraordinary talents or high priestesses of perfection. Mr. Barber would have none of it. Not for him was the fussing over appearance, nor the clutter of single-use pots, nor the persnickety obsessions of precise measurements. He liked to say there were but four recipes in the world -- fry it, boil it, bake it or screw it up.

He loved rustic dishes and he delighted in using whatever fresh ingredients happened to be at hand. In many ways, he anticipated the movements towards slow food and the 100-mile diet. "Cooking, like sex and dancing, is a pleasure best shared," he insisted, luring a generation of novice chefs into the kitchen.

Leslie James Barber was born in Dover, England, to a family in which the father expected his menu to be unchanged from week to week, just as his mother had done. So, it was roast lamb on Sunday, cold lamb leftovers on Monday, shepherd's pie on Wednesday, every week of the year. It was to be years before young James broke the mould.

Mr. Barber enlisted in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War. He served in France with Combined Operations, whose demand for intelligence work he managed to carry out while currying the favour of local farm girls, who, he said later, introduced him to the pleasures of both the kitchen and the bedroom.

In 1952, he brought his wife and new-born son to Canada, crossing the ocean aboard the SS Atlantic, a journey made more comfortable after he talked himself from third-class to a first-class berth.

A skiing accident led to an infection and a year-long stint in a neck-to-ankle body cast, bringing an end to his career as an consulting engineer. Some time during his recuperation, he decided that the life of a writer was for him.

After his marriage collapsed, he cooked meals for himself, seeking to reproduce the foods he had enjoyed in wartime France. He indulged a liking for Chinese food by giving English lessons to the owner of the On-On Tea Garden in Chinatown in exchange free meals.

Mr. Barber wound up as a theatre and dance critic at the Vancouver Province, where he eventually became restaurant critic. In 1971, he combined whimsical cartoon sketches with recipes in a volume titled Ginger Tea Makes Friends. This was followed by Fear of Frying (1978) and Flash in the Pan (1981), the first of a dozen cookbooks. The most recent is One-Pot Wonders (Harbour, 2006), which describes meals easily cooked both on land and at sea.

He did not succumb to trends in food preparation, so his volumes never felt out of date. Many found new audiences in revised editions.

With his trim white beard and half-crescent of hair, a Buddha belly always threatening to stretch his shirt front, he seemed on television to be gnomish. Perhaps that explained his casting as the spokesman for Money's Mushrooms, a long-running campaign in the 1980s made Mr. Barber a household figure.

A prolific writer, Mr. Barber was a restaurant reviewer for The Georgia Straight weekly and a contributor to many newspapers and magazines. A children's book (Once Upon Anne Elephant There Was a Time) and two paperback guides to the restaurants of Vancouver were also among his credits.

In the summer of 2001, Mr. Barber and his long-time companion Christina Burridge settled on a five-hectare farm in the Cowichan Valley. The couple married that fall.

They grew beans, garlic, carrots, potatoes and winter kale on the farm, which also became home to seven donkeys. Mr. Barber wrote an intermittent online diary about life in the valley, which he called "Canada's Provence." The entries can be read at www.james-barber.com.

Despite the bucolic setting, he maintained a hectic schedule. He conducted cooking classes, published a cookbook last year, and helped promote the release of a revised edition of Cooking for Two this year.

Thursday, Mr. Barber was found at the dining-room table of his Duncan farm, an opened cookbook in front of him and a pot of chicken stock on the stove.

JAMES BARBER

James Barber was born in Dover, England, on March 23, 1923. He died of natural causes at his farm in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island on Nov. 29, 2007. He was 84. He is survived by his wife, two daughters, three sons and two grandchildren.

Illustration

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