

The Little-Known Queen of the Culinary World



I worked for a woman named Marilyn Lewis in 1980. I only met her in person once, but she made a lifelong impression on me.

Marilyn and her husband Harry lived in LA. He was an actor. Actors are not always working constantly and some fall on harder times. Harry knew that and had experienced that himself.

Besides acting, Harry dreamed of opening a restaurant; one that could cater to people who didn't have a ton of money for dining. Marilyn took on that dream, became an entrepreneur, and started a restaurant that became a successful chain. It was called Hamburger Hamlet. I worked for the Hamburger Hamlet as a manager in the Chicago location. I was practically a youngster, but they hired me anyway.

Out in California, Hamburger Hamlet started small and grew into a chain that folks in the 80's referred to as a "nice Denny's sort of place." There were locations all over California by the time I came to know Hamburger Hamlet in Chicago.

But Hamburger Hamlet in Chicago was no Denny's. It was a fancy burger place. They served other things besides hamburgers but as

you'll see if you read the longer story about Marilyn she was the one who put gourmet burgers on the map. When you eat a burger with more than LT0 and cheese on it you have Marilyn to thank.

The location I worked in was an experiment in leaving California and opening the fancier version of Hamburger Hamlet. The place seated 250 people. That's a large restaurant. It was located in a wealthy neighborhood just off of Michigan Avenue. It was lavishly decorated with wood paneling that had been taken from the finest homes in Europe. A really fancy bar held center position. The coveted table in the room was actually an elevator – a lift as the English would say – taken from Winston Churchill's country home in England. That one booth set Marilyn back over \$1 million dollars. It seated four. Anyone who got to sit in that lift was stared at. They had to be famous... or so people thought.

Hamburger Hamlet did not take reservations. The wait was always almost an hour for dinner. Of course you had a drink in the bar while you waited.

I saw many a famous person and greeted several of them; everyone from the local TV weather man (who was an American Airlines pilot too) to actors, rich guys and sports stars. The Chicago Bears used to come in on Sundays and pack the house after a big victory. One day Billie Jean King walked in for a late lunch. I knew she was famous, but it didn't dawn on me who she was until I looked down and saw her famous, gleaming white tennis shoes. Remember the bald guy from the 7-UP commercials? He came in for dinner once. You could hear his booming voice from one end of the place to the other. And when he laughed you could hardly hear the music. The list goes on.

I could probably write a short novel about my experiences at

Hamburger Hamlet but I'm here to talk about mushrooms.

One of the things that Marilyn taught me was how to clean mushrooms. She was an absolute fanatic about it. It was not how I was taught how to clean mushrooms, so I thought she was a bit nuts. But I learned. This link is to an article on how to clean mushrooms published by Bon Appetit. This lines up with what Marilyn taught me. I will never forget that one of my first gourmet cooking purchases was a mushroom-cleaning brush. I think I still have it over 40 years later.

Writing this article makes me miss a woman I only met once. How's that for making an impression?

Cheers,