# *The Seasons of a Chef*

*Once again, Tony Clark springs ahead.*

Mar 21, 1999

BY MICHAEL KLEIN

Out of a gray noon a woman walks through the restaurant door, the strains of Mozart following her from the Curtis Institute across Locust Street.

Four steps along the black-and-white tile - click click click click - and she's seated at a round table by the window, with a smile and a menu.

She is the first paying customer at Potcheen, the first of four restaurants to open this winter at the new Sheraton Rittenhouse Square in Center City.

The woman looks at the menu, a plain sheet on a clipboard that bears a list of hearty pub dishes.

From the kitchen door 50 feet away, the chef sizes up the situation and beckons to a manager. "Guess," the chef commands with a grin.

The manager looks toward the woman. "Black bean soup. "

The chef shakes his head. "Octopus. "

For the chef and manager, this is purely an exercise in fun, a goofy mind game to take the jangle off the nervous energy that seems to drown out the drone of the dishwasher behind them in the kitchen.

Every journey begins with a first step, and every restaurant begins with a first meal.

This is it.

The woman's eyes reach the bottom of the menu, and fall upon the words "Executive chef Tony Clark."

She selects the turkey sausage and the ratatouille and taps a finger on Clark's name.

Tony Clark. Isn't he . . . ?

Isn't he . . . what?

The chef lured out of obscurity from the Four Seasons Hotel in 1996 to open a chic restaurant at Broad and Sansom Streets? The guy who picked up a passel of national awards, rubbed elbows with big shots and pols and wise guys and celebrities, got glowing press and standing O's from the smart set in the dining room, and then - poof!

Quit.

Left his name outside on the Avenue of the Arts and went home to New Jersey last spring to toss the ball around the yard with Anthony and play Stratego and Nintendo with Brianna and go to Home Depot in the minivan on a Saturday afternoon like a normal father and not work like a dog - a dog! - 16, 17 hours a day, seven days a week, missing Ashley's first steps and, as for little Frankie, the kid was almost delivered in the dining room. . . .

Yes, that Tony Clark.

He's also the Tony Clark who can make grown men cry with his kitchen tirades. The Tony Clark who even his detractors will tell you cooks like a god. The Tony Clark who was in the lead car during one of the fastest restaurant ascents - and descents - in recorded history, but managed to survive the roller-coaster ride. And even come out on top, eager for another trip.

The ground floor of the Sheraton Rittenhouse Square gleams with marble. A waterfall burbles near the elevators and 40-foot stalks of bamboo soar in an indoor atrium. In the heart of the hotel, which the public does not see, is Tony Clark 's kitchen. Here the scene is no less pristine. The terra-cotta floor is immaculate, the counters are polished, the cooks tidy up as they go along.

Clark's kitchen is much like Clark himself: clean, organized, intense. He's a burly guy who could pass for John Goodman's younger, thinner, better-looking brother - a solid, 6-foot-1 regular guy of 37 years, with thin-framed glasses and a baby-smooth face that bears no trace of 5 o'clock shadow, even at midnight.

His brown hair is slicked back. His hair shakes when he hollers. In the kitchen, this is often. Outside the kitchen, he is soft-spoken, gentle, mellow. "Like a light switch," Martin Hamann, who teamed with Clark at the Four Seasons, says of the transformation.

Clark, in his customary white chef's jacket, black-and-white houndstooth pants and black clogs, tells any kitchen staffer within earshot: "Walk with pride. You've been through hell with me."

Working with Clark is hell. So says Clark himself. "They think I'm a monster. My tempo is nonstop. First day here, we had this kid we thought was going to be good. He heard me yelling and he just disappeared. His wife came in to pick up his knives."

Clark does not suffer slackers. "I can't go out and say to a customer, `Sorry that's too salty, but my guy was out all night partying,' " he says.

Compared to other chefs, Clark came to cooking late in life, in his teens. The only boy in a family of four girls in Westmont, N.J., he never cooked, says his sister Eleanor Rand, 10 months his junior. Their mother did it all, shooing their father, a computer programmer, and young Tony out of the kitchen.

Clark was the class clown at Holy Savior School and at St. Paul VI High School. "Funny but annoying," says Rand, who was in the same grade for all 12 years of Catholic school and probably knows him better than anybody.

Clark was - by his own admission - "not great at school." But he always worked.

He was 17 and washing dishes at a Shore restaurant in the mid-'70s when the bell went off. "I decided I wanted to be the best dishwasher they had," he recalls. "I loved the whole atmosphere."

It was in the kitchen - washing dishes, prepping vegetables, minding the stove - that Tony felt most comfortable. "I liked the buzz, and working around all these unique people."

He dismissed the idea of college in favor of the renowned Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. In the beginning, "I was almost in tears. This was the first real pressure in my life," he says. "It kind of scared me. What was I getting myself into? "

Clark doubted his abilities. "I struggled. I questioned whether I could suffer through the attitudes of the chefs. Even the [other] students had egos! "

After graduation, he went home to Philadelphia. He was feeling "still so unconfident" when he heard the Four Seasons was hiring. "My buddy says, `Go down there,' " Clark recalls.

Clark put on his only suit and stuck his resume under the nose of executive chef Jean-Marie Lacroix. He was turned down. At his buddy's urging, he returned the next day. Same suit. Same turndown. And the next. Same suit. Aha! Someone didn't show up for work, and an exasperated Lacroix said, "Get him a uniform."

Clark slid around in his black dress shoes for 10 hours, and was hired that night. He went home to New Jersey, and told his mother of his good fortune.

She handed him his mail: a rejection letter from the Four Seasons. He threw it away.

Lacroix, meanwhile, was building what probably was - and is - the best overall restaurant kitchen in the city, a training ground where hotshots such as

Francesco Martorella (Brasserie Perrier), Jean-Francois Taquet (Taquet), Bruce Lim (Ciboulette) and David Gottlieb (Dilworthtown Inn) honed their skills.

"Jean-Marie focused me," Clark says. He is still in awe of the man he calls his second father.

The affection is mutual; Lacroix has joked that every one of his gray hairs can be traced to Clark. "He worked as hard as anyone I've ever worked with," Lacroix says.

But Clark was no overnight sensation. He stayed after hours to master skills like making omelets and sauces. Then he would drive home, sketch his work station on a sheet of paper, and go through the motions, trying to shave his preparation times. He cooked for his close-knit family. His sister Eleanor's husband, Wayne Rand, recalls a creation that made use of little more than an egg, ketchup and tabasco. "It was incredible," Rand says. "That's when I knew he was on his way."

It took Clark a decade to work his way from slicing carrots in the employee cafeteria to whipping up five-star meals as the lunch chef, a $43,000-a-year post.

Which is where we might have left the story of Tony Clark, if not for one of his customers.

For all the warmth and clubbiness that a top-drawer restaurant exudes - the cachet of celebrity, the happy clatter of plates, the passion and the hubris - the business really is cold. Even seasoned restaurateurs work themselves into the ground in their quest for the combination of location, food, atmosphere and service that might - just possibly - spell success.

In tandem with Center City's recent rebirth, a boomtown mentality has gripped Philadelphia's restaurant community. Rents are skyrocketing. Competition has grown more intense. A tight band of top-flight staff leaps from grand opening to grand opening - followed by a fickle populace that seems to grow more jaded by the week.

In L.A., everybody's working on a movie. In Philadelphia, everybody's working on a restaurant.

But almost everybody is due for a reality check, if history is any guide. The restaurant business is one of the biggest crapshoots there is. Four out of five restaurants fail before their fifth anniversary. And still they keep opening - in this area, at the rate of nearly two a week.

Tony Clark's was hardly the only restaurant to plummet into the abyss last year.

But what a fall it was.

On a freezing January afternoon in 1996, A. Wesley Wyatt, a builder of business interiors, was having lunch with lawyer Richie Phillips in the sumptuous Fountain at the Four Seasons.

Wyatt talked with Phillips about the upscale pizzeria he was bankrolling at Broad and Sansom. Sometime during the conversation, Wyatt got the idea to hire the guy who'd cooked their lunch. He and Phillips marched right into the kitchen, and Wyatt asked Clark if he would consider working with him, in exchange for a piece of the business.

Clark talked it over with his wife, Doreen. Wyatt convinced his managing partners - Frank Novelli, a buyer of building materials for Wyatt's company, and Albert Puggi, a marble contractor - to include Clark and to think fancier.

The restaurant would be called Tony Clark's. The class clown from Westmont would get the last laugh, his name on an awning across the street from the Union League - and a reported 80 grand a year. That none of the partners had ever run a freestanding restaurant didn't concern them. "I grew up in an Italian restaurant," says Puggi, the marble man. "I also have been in business. There's a basic outline to running a successful business."

The menu would be based on "passion food," as Clark called his American cuisine.

The interior design, by Amburn/Jarosinski, was a testament to cold rolled steel. Black semi-sheer screens divided the dining room from the cooking areas and bar. Artsy abstract chandeliers hung from the black ceiling. A huge floral arrangement sat in the middle. Banquettes were covered in a rich olive, gold and black Ultrasuede.

Very New York.

The place looked like a million bucks, and cost twice that.

"We worked like dogs getting that place together," Novelli says.

Opening day was April 8, 1996. It didn't take long for the cognoscenti to find Tony Clark 's. Clark himself was easy to spot. He was the one screaming at the kitchen staff and turning out delights such as corn-cake blini with Sevruga caviar and chive creme fraiche, and sauteed pork chops with baked beans.

On the fifth day, with then-Inquirer food critic Elaine Tait in the packed dining room for a review dinner, a waiter bounded up to Clark, out of breath. "Tony," he said. "Doreen's in labor."

Clark looked up. Through the screen, Clark could see Tait contentedly lapping up her appetizer. He turned slightly and saw Doreen seated nearby, in obvious distress.

"How far apart are the contractions?" Clark asked through gritted teeth. The waiter jogged over to Doreen and returned. "Ten minutes."

With that, Clark garnished the entrees in front of him, tossed aside his apron and whisked Doreen to the hospital. No one in the dining room knew.

Frankie Clark, the couple's fourth child, came into the world that night.

In a manner of speaking, so did Tony Clark - and Tony Clark's.

Tait wrote a rave review. "Few restaurants anywhere have done as well as this one in wrapping up all of the success elements - decor, service, food, housekeeping - right from day one," she said.

Three days after the article appeared, John Mariani of Esquire magazine, arguably America's most influential restaurant critic, dropped in for lunch. He squealed jubilantly at every bite of his sweetbreads with three-vinegar sauce, roast quail with country grits, and baked Vidalia onion and lentils. Then he polished off a round of desserts, including hazelnut meringue with a melted chocolate center.

That November, Esquire anointed Tony Clark's one of America's best new restaurants, the only Philadelphia restaurant so honored that year.

But by then, Tony Clark 's was already on its way down.

All during the summer of 1996, while Tony Clark's stock was rising, a bitter rivalry was playing itself out behind the scenes.

Novelli and Puggi say Clark and manager Rose Parrotta, who had been with the project from its inception, wanted them out - and drove a wedge between them and Wyatt.

Puggi didn't like Clark's style. "If there was someone getting any attention, [Clark] had to get them out of the way," he says. "I saw him make grown men cry" when he berated them in the kitchen.

Clark and Parrotta said Puggi, the construction guy, and Novelli, the marble guy, contributed little to the operation.

"It wasn't fair for them," Clark says now. "It wasn't fair for me."

In late September 1996, Puggi and Novelli were asked to leave. They responded by suing Clark and Wyatt, claiming they were wrongfully stripped of their rights as owners.

But the restaurant's infighting didn't end there. The relationship between Clark and Wyatt also became strained. Associates of Wyatt say he became frustrated by both the lawsuit and the restaurant's cash-flow problems. Though first-year revenues were about $3 million and the restaurant was on track for a bigger second year, most months Tony Clark 's did not show a profit.

The tension grew.

Even as Clark was named one of Food & Wine magazine's 12 best new chefs in America, in spring 1997, a management shake-up was under way.

Wyatt hired Stewart Mahan, who had worked with Clark at the Four Seasons, as general manager. Almost immediately, Wyatt also hired Joe Wolf, who had just left Striped Bass, and installed him as Mahan's boss.

"That was not a smart decision," Mahan says. He says that the restaurant could ill afford Wolf's salary and that Wolf acted as an unnecessary buffer between him and Wyatt.

As Wolf recalls the situation, his services were needed. But he won't elaborate.

All through the summer of 1997, Clark, Mahan and Parrotta clashed with Wolf. They challenged him at every turn, decrying as frivolous his decision to hire Marguerite Rodgers Ltd. to redecorate the dining room.

By Thanksgiving, with the busiest season of the year just ahead, the tension escalated into full-scale mutiny. The workers issued an ultimatum: Either Wolf goes, or we go. Wolf elected to take a position in the office to work with Wyatt on other ventures.

The mood at the restaurant improved, but not the financial situation.

One night early last spring, a customer came in and started throwing Wyatt's name around. This happened all the time when people wanted a better table or a free dessert, Mahan says, but this customer's boorish demeanor left a strong impression. "He had an attitude," Mahan says.

Not long afterward, the customer and another man walked in and announced that they were preparing to buy Tony Clark's.

The staff was unsettled by the prospect. So much so that April 30, 1998, was the last night for most of the workers - including Tony Clark . On May 1, a skeleton crew put out dinner. Wyatt hired workers to replace those who'd walked.

The deal that made the staff flee never came off.

But the restaurant - Tony Clarkless, as one wag dubbed it - was finished. It was pronounced dead on June 15 at age 26 months and one week.

Surviving was the lawsuit filed by Puggi and Novelli. Six weeks after the closing, the suit was settled out of court for an undisclosed sum.

The space at Broad and Sansom, under different ownership, is now an Italian restaurant called Pompeii.

"It was sad not to see it work," says Wyatt, who declined to answer further questions, citing the lawsuit's confidentiality agreement. He says he harbors no bitterness. "I only want the best for Tony," he says.

With a family to feed, Tony Clark could not afford to sit quietly at home after leaving the restaurant that bore his name. Fortunately, he didn't need to.

The phone was ringing with offers. The best came in early May from Rittenhouse Hospitality Management Inc.

We're doing a hotel at 18th and Locust. Four restaurants. We need an executive chef.

Clark started three weeks later, putting together a kitchen team that includes some of the city's most highly regarded names, including chef de cuisine Clark Gilbert (formerly at La Terrasse) and director of operations Ed Stein (whose background includes the Four Seasons and Morton's of Chicago).

Aside from Potcheen, there are Harrison Row (serving moderately priced comfort foods), Square Bar (serving a pricey Italian menu) and the Atrium (a generic hotel restaurant serving breakfast and lunch).

Clark negotiated a perk that few chefs have: a room at the hotel on weekends. This is how Doreen - sometimes with the children, who range from nearly 3 to 12 years old, and sometimes by herself - sees her husband on a regular basis.

"I miss having some kind of a family life," says Doreen Clark, recalling last summer, when Tony Clark was working regular hours before the hotel opened. "I've been raising children by myself for 13 years. . . . But this business is not a family kind of business."

Clark had warned her about the time commitment when they met on a blind date when he was 25 and she was 19. "I didn't understand," she says, ruefully, at her kitchen table on a rare Sunday night that Tony has taken off.

The house - a grand new Colonial that Doreen proudly decorated herself - is Tony Clark 's way of trying to make it up to his family. When he and Doreen were first married, they lived in Wissinoming and had to walk seven blocks to the supermarket because they had no car.

Someday, Tony Clark says, he would like to open a bed-and-breakfast in Cape May. Great hours, great vibes in the kitchen, impeccable food, atmosphere by Doreen. It would be a mom-and-pop operation, simple and intimate.

He might even call it Tony Clark 's.