

## Sheila Scotter suggests...

### A MAN ABOUT THE HOUSE

## Sheila Scotter



“IN PARIS we concentrate so much on food that we are always searching for the best. I go quite long distances to special places for special items.

“Of course like all French housewives I pop out daily for crisp new bread, fresh vegetables, salads, cheeses and the usual household needs from the shops close by. Entertaining is so easy for me because I am thoroughly spoiled by my wonderful Rene.”

The distinct warm voice of Madame Vera Fels has exactly the same broad Russian accent in both French and English. For over 20 years she has always called me “Shay-la.”

Recently I was a pampered house-guest in her magnificent apartment on the sunny side of notoriously expensive Avenue Foch

side of notoriously expensive Avenue Foch (fittingly rhymes with posh) before she left France for a nostalgic holiday in her beloved Australia. I too was fed and fussed over by "wonderful Rene," her quiet, ultra efficient butler-cook and impeccable man-about-the house.

## Queen of Sydney haute couture

Generous with his recipes (one on this page for a new way to roast duck) but exceedingly reticent about allowing anyone in the unusually (for France) modernized American equipped kitchen, Rene not only does all the cooking and serving of meals, but is the guardian of Vera's priceless furnishings.

Rene gave us glasses of Vera's favourite early morning health drink of fresh orange, grapefruit and lemon juices mixed together, then light, rich-in-butter croissants and large cups of piping hot coffee. With not exactly unwelcome interruptions from a demanding telephone we planned our day, talked of old friends, new lovers, and of the happy time when she was the charismatic queen of haute couture in Sydney and known all over Australia as Germaine Rocher.

The apartment is on the sixth floor with a view from the famous Arc de Triomphe to the Porte Dauphine at the edge of the Bois de Boulogne. Her neighbours include Prince Rainier and Princess Grace of Monaco, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, Christina Onassis, millionaire oil sheiks

and Arab rulers of untold wealth. She is totally unsnob.

"Do you know, Shay-la, even in Paris my hobbies are the same. Most evenings I read a lot and watch television. I am an absolute addict. I even watch trash."

She is also totally un-phoney about age.

She is also totally un-phoney about age. "Nowadays to me anyone in their 50s is still young," she candidly tells one. "I'm 70!" I print it to encourage women to follow her lifelong regime of sensible diet, daily walks, a very strict skin-care routine and avoidance of suntanning. With her hardly lined face, neat, petitely rounded figure and hordes of admirers in all age groups, she is, as the French say, "*incroyable*."

The spacious high ceilinged salon with its fine carved panelling, elegant double french windows, and impressive open fireplace is perfect for entertaining. Guests sit comfortably on her deep yellow velvet sofa massed with pale primrose silk cushions, or more formally in ornate yellow and misty-blue silk covered upright Louis XV chairs grouped French style for conversation. Dobell, Drysdale, Donald Friend and Jeffrey Smart paintings blend with French and Far Eastern treasures, ancient Chinese silk rugs, Ming dynasty vases, lovely black and gold lacquered coffee tables and a collection of jade drinking cups each over 500 years old. She has always collected antiques. Before emigrating to Australia in 1935 her late husband Charles Fels was a dealer in Shanghai exporting to Paris.

## **A welcome French winter dish**

Pre-dinner or lunch party drinking is always champagne Nicolas Feuillatte, a not too dry, not too sweet *reserve particuliere* that is popular in Paris.

A dinner party on my arrival was masterminded by the same wonderful Rene. He produced delicious clear consomme with freshly made ravioli and grated parmesan cheese, served in delicate Chinese bowls with lids. "Shay-la, you don't know the trouble I go to, to get

don't know the trouble I go to, to get absolutely fresh parmesan cheese," said Vera. I must confess the packeted kind is as different as freshly ground coffee is from instant.

As a special treat for a ravenously hungry traveller, Rene had made me "pot

au feu," a traditional winter dish in France made with pieces of beef and chunks of chicken simmered together with marrow bones and eaten with boiled leeks, carrots, turnips, onions and celery and garnished with coarse salt. With scrumptious roquefort and creamy camembert cheeses we drank and unforgettable Mouton Rothschild 1953 bordeaux brought as a surprise by a rather attractive and generous Swiss guest. Dinner finished with a special Rene "tarte aux pommes" glazed with plum jam, and the promise of a diet lunch tomorrow.

## **Canard aux pommes Rene**

### **What you need:**

A medium size tender duck  
500g (1lb) cooking apples  
1 can of French "petits pois" (peas)  
1 small lettuce  
a little butter, oil, salt and pepper  
1kg (2lb) potatoes  
a pinch of sugar and zest of orange

### **What you do:**

Grate a little orange rind and put this and lots of salt and pepper inside the duck. Rub salt and pepper and the zest of orange on the outside too. There is no need to use any butter as there is enough fat under the skin of duck.

Roast the duck in a fairly low oven for a good hour, basting it from time to time with a little hot water only. While it is cooking, peel and core the apples and cut into quarters. Saute them in a pan gently in a

quarters. Saute them in a pan gently in a little butter and oil. Add a pinch of sugar and turn them over carefully so they brown well but do not break. Keep warm until ready to serve.

The best vegetables according to Rene for this dish are *petits pois et pommes de terre sautees*. He very often uses a can of peas (must be the tiny French ones) which he rinses and reheats gently together with a little chopped onion and a lettuce cut into quarters and a knob of butter. The lettuce makes sufficient liquid so do not add water.

The potatoes are best boiled first in their skins, then allowed to get completely cold before peeling and cutting into slices (otherwise they break rather easily). Fry them in a mixture of butter and oil, shaking the pan so each slice gets covered and becomes a lovely golden colour. Season well before serving.