

# Trusty Cooking

by Peggy Callagy

The doctor should probably be tending to some paperwork for his last patient, and the realtor should probably be out showing her clients a few houses, but for several days each year their other jobs — as chefs *extraordinaire* for the Harvard Schools Trust's annual gala dinner and theater evening — take priority. This March will, in fact, be the fifth year that Eugene and Donna Solod of Myrick Lane have set out to feed 300 or more diners an exquisite gourmet meal.

They're not sure whether to thank him or not, but Donna and Gene point a quick finger at their neighbor Ken Brater for coming up with the concept of a gourmet meal in private homes to raise money for the trust, money that goes to school enrichment projects in town. The evening is rounded out with a performance by the Bromfield Drama Society, to add the "theater" component to the evening; then a dessert at Bromfield caps off the festivities. The basic format of the gala has remained the same since 1991, and the smiling faces pouring into the Cronin Auditorium each March show that the idea is a winner.

So how do a physician and a realtor serve dinner for 350 people, you ask? Well, Ashley and Andrew, the Solod children, might reply that it means having to eat a whole lot of chicken. For five years these poor kids have eaten more than their share of sample chicken dinners.

Each year the Solods begin at least three months ahead of time trying out sauces and countless vegetable and grain side dishes. Donna says, "Gene is really the mastermind of the meal. He plans the chicken recipe and always makes the salad dressing himself." Even after the menu is tentatively selected, it is not over until the chosen meal has been eaten one last time as a reheated feast. That's because the 300-plus dinners are dispersed to fifteen host homes on the morning of the gala, and therefore have to be reheated in the evening. If an item can't hold up to the reheat test it will not make it to the gala tables.

Salad and hors d'oeuvres are also part of the full-course meal that these two chefs prepare with little cooking assistance, but with a lot of gopher work and pot-washing by their good friends Ken and Diane Irwin. The night before the dinner, these two couples work together until at least midnight pulling the meal together.

But plenty of work goes on before the actual cooking begins, too. Donna admits she is totally absorbed from Wednesday through Saturday the week of the event. She loads up her

Explorer at Carlson's with about 150 pounds of chicken, 75 heads of lettuce, 130 pounds of vegetables, and more. Carlson's gets most of the main food items for the meal at cost for the trust. Gene remembers loading up the truck one year and heading home, only to realize after a few blocks that the car's hatch was open. Fortunately, his vision of chicken breasts lining Ayer Road did not come to pass.

"The house is basically a disaster area that week," Donna laughs. She uses her back porch as an extra refrigerator and prays earnestly that cold weather will prevail on the big day. If not, Carlson's walk-in refrigerator is available, and it is sometimes used for the items that are prepared early.

Fifteen card tables are set up in the garage, where all the courses for each host home can be arranged and left to be picked up. One year, the Solods unhappily discovered that they had somehow sent out their own main dish, the one for the group eating at their own house, and they had to scramble to make an extra batch at the last minute.

Donna and Gene agree that the original challenge was, "Can we do this?" Now, having done it, they find that each new menu brings its unique

challenges. As Gene puts it, "I think of this job as somewhat like a woman having a baby. The day after, she says she'll never do it again, but a year later she has sort of forgotten all that." Last year's new challenge was probably the fact that the refrigerator died on Friday evening, cooking night, and they had to beg Hunter Appliance to come and fix it, which they did. The Solods were, as you might expect, up to their elbows in — you guessed it — chicken, and the repair man meticulously repacked all the food that had been taken out of the freezer. "It looked like you could use all the help you could get," he told them.

It's true that they get a pretty good rush when the last person picks up his food on the day of the gala, but the Solods' real motive is to give something back to the school and community.

"I don't have a lot of time to volunteer around town, says Gene. "I guess you might say that I cram all my hours into a couple of days."

The gala will take place on Saturday, March 18 this year. Anyone who's got a yen for Ashley's favorite meal can still check on a last-minute ticket.

