



Beard, James (1903-1985)

by Linda Rapp

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James Beard's passion in life was food, and, through his writing, teaching, and public appearances, he had an enormous effect on American cooking. As food writer Craig Claibourne observed, "Beard, more than any other person, helped shape the change in American dining habits. He was an innovator, an experimenter, a missionary in bringing the gospel of good cooking to the home table."

Beard was nothing if not a zealous apostle. Through his frequent appearances on television and at public events, he became widely recognized as one of the foremost representatives of American gastronomy. He was known as affable, witty, and, of course, wildly enthusiastic about cooking and serving good food. He was not, however, known as a gay man.

Beard's memoir-cum-cookbook, *Delights and Prejudices*, published in 1964, made no mention of his sexual orientation, which is hardly surprising considering the social climate of the time. In the 1980s, though, when Beard was planning a second memoir, he stated, "By the time I was seven, I knew that I was gay. I think that it's time to talk about that now." By then, however, Beard was in failing health, and he never completed the book project.

Beard would eventually settle in New York City, but he had a lifelong affection for his native Oregon. The only child of John and Mary (née Jones) Beard, he was born in Portland on May 5, 1903 and grew up in the city.

His earliest "taste memories" were of dishes prepared by the family's Chinese-born cook and by his mother. Mary Beard was not a trained cook, but she was an excellent instinctive one who recognized the importance of fresh ingredients of high quality.

Beard and his mother spent summers at her seaside cottage in nearby Gearhart. His father rarely joined them. The couple's marriage had rapidly deteriorated, and they largely went their separate ways, John Beard seeking comfort and affection from a long-term Chinese mistress by whom he had another son, and Mary Beard socializing and traveling with women friends.

Mary Beard was renowned in Gearhart for her lavish and elaborate picnics on the beach. Her son fondly recalled digging clams for some of the dishes and savoring other delicious local seafood.

In the idyllic summer days at Gearhart, Beard began exploring his sexuality with other boys. His mother, who counted gay men and lesbians among her friends, spoke to him candidly and positively about his sexual orientation. Beard's father did not learn of his homosexuality until much later and "was not thrilled."

Mary Beard fostered her son's interest in cooking. By the age of eight, he had learned to make bread.

Neither John nor Mary Beard was particularly religious, but they attended church in accordance with social expectations and put young James into the choir, where his musical gifts were appreciated. By the age of

twelve, Beard was acting and singing in amateur theater productions in Portland and dreaming of a career on the stage.

Having graduated from high school at fifteen, Beard enrolled at Reed College in Portland to study theater, but, as he recalled near the end of his life, "I got kicked out of Reed for politics and because sex had reared its lovely head. There was an attachment to one of the male professors. They didn't kick the professor out. I went home to live. Even then, Father wasn't aware of my sexual life. That came later."

His mother arranged for him to continue his musical studies in London, and he made his formal debut as a singer there in 1923. Shortly thereafter, he moved to Paris with the intention of furthering his studies, but he soon became enthralled by the city's bohemian culture, and he found greater acceptance of gay men and lesbians than he had experienced anywhere else.

He met and became enamored of a handsome young man from Holland. In addition to enjoying the ambiance of Paris, the two traveled to Berlin, where gay men and lesbians could also participate in a vibrant subculture.

Beard's Parisian sojourn was short-lived, however. By the end of the year, his mother informed him that she could not afford to support him there once he had abandoned his pursuit of a career in opera.

Changing his focus from singing to acting, Beard settled in New York, but he found few parts and so returned to Portland, where he took jobs including teaching and radio work before heading to Hollywood in early 1927. He got only bit parts in the movies, though, and was back in Oregon within a year.

Standing six-foot-three and with a weight that fluctuated between 240 and 300 pounds, Beard did not fit the image of a leading man. Indeed, his best reviews came for character parts, yet for years he maintained the hope of winning starring roles.

Beard again did radio work to help support himself, and in 1932 he also began offering cooking lessons. Although without formal training, Beard was, like his mother, a natural and avid cook, and a perceptive one as well, who not only appreciated the food of his native Northwest but was excited by the other cuisines that he had encountered in his travels.

In September 1937 Beard returned to New York for a last try at a career in theater, but he eventually realized that it was not to be.

At least partly out of economic necessity, Beard was living with a man named James Cullum. Through Cullum, he met William Rhode in late 1938, and his life took a new and fateful turn.

Rhode and his sister Irma were interested in opening a catering business that would specialize in hors d'oeuvre. Beard eagerly joined the venture. With financial assistance from Cullum, Hors d'Oeuvre, Inc. opened in January 1939 and was an immediate success.

The business received favorable notice in the press, and only a few months later, it was chosen to cater a reception of the prestigious International Wine & Food Society. The group's secretary, Jeanne Owen, impressed by Beard, secured him a contract with her publisher. Beard's first cookbook, *Hors d'Oeuvre and Canapés*, appeared in 1940. It sold very well and remained in print until 2001, an extraordinary record for a cookbook.

Rhode felt slighted by the choice of Beard to write the cookbook, and as a result of the hard feelings between them, Beard left Hors d'Oeuvre, Inc. shortly before its publication.

The publisher commissioned a second book, *Cook It Outdoors* (1941). With its success, Beard began to take his place among food writers and was soon contributing articles to magazines such as *House Beautiful* and *Gourmet*.

When World War II broke out, Beard made several attempts to enlist in the military but was turned down for being overweight. Nevertheless, he was drafted into the army in August 1942 and, despite having been told that he would be in the Quartermaster Corps, was placed in the cryptography school of the Army Air Corps.

Less than enthusiastic about the assignment, Beard took advantage of a new regulation that permitted men over the age of thirty-eight to request a discharge if they could go to a civilian job that served the national interest. Beard left the military in February 1943 and went to work on the farm of Cullum's parents near Reading, Pennsylvania.

After the summer Beard went from the farm to New York, where he rented an apartment in Greenwich Village. There he tested recipes for and wrote his third book, *Fowl and Game Cookery* (1944).

At year's end Beard became a manager for the United Seamen's Service (USS), an agency that operated clubs for the sailors of the Merchant Marine. For the remainder of the war, he ran USS facilities in Puerto Rico, Rio de Janeiro, Panama, and Naples. In each place he took advantage of the opportunity to learn about the local cuisine from the excellent cooks who worked at the clubs.

Just as the war was ending, Beard landed in Marseilles. He delighted in discovering the food of Provence. After obtaining a large quantity of Châteauneuf-du-Pape wine for the USS club and some copper cookware for himself, Beard completed his obligation to the USS and sailed for New York, arriving home in the last days of 1945.

The post-war world included television, and Beard became a part of it. A recurring cooking segment on *For You and Yours*, a show mixing household hints and celebrity interviews, led to Beard's own program, *I Love to Eat!*, the first cooking show on television, which debuted in August 1946.

The program ran until May of the next year, when the sponsoring company, Borden, withdrew all support from television projects, unsure that the new medium could compete with radio.

Beard became the restaurant critic for *Gourmet* magazine in early 1949 and published his *Fireside Cook Book* later that year. He continued his writing with a regular column for *Argosy* magazine.

Biographer Robert Clark reports that in 1950 Beard began a relationship with "a Dutchman, Ate de Boer, a shadowy presence over the next few years, whom no one remembers much about." Beard's friends regarded the "relationship [as] of little emotional intimacy, if one of some affection and companionship, . . . and the delectation of his lover's body; perhaps not love but nonetheless a quiet and forthright rejoinder to solitude."

Beard had a great gift for friendship and was generous in supporting those for whom he cared. He was, however, frequently depressed by his failure to find a life-partner, and, states Clark, in his later years, "his long-standing guardedness about his emotional life gave way to a sad and bitter openness" and to a despairing belief that "no one had ever genuinely loved him" and that "he was incapable of love himself."

Beard continued his prodigious output of magazine articles and cookbooks, leading the *New York Times* to declare him "the Dean of American Cookery."

In 1956, initially in partnership with chef André Surmain, Beard opened a cooking school. The personnel and location would change several times over the years, but Beard's enthusiasm and natural talent as a teacher made the venture a great success. Beard continued to offer classes in New York throughout his life and eventually added special short courses in Oregon and San Francisco.

At around the same time, Beard, deeply depressed by the break-up of an affair, met Italian architect Gino Colfacci, who soon moved in with him and never left, even after they ceased to be romantically involved.

Beard was a champion not just of American cooking but also of American cooks. In the early 1950s he sought an introduction to California writer Helen Evans Brown after reading her *The West Coast Cook Book* and being greatly impressed by her extensive knowledge of regional cooking. The two would remain lifelong friends, exchanging frequent letters about food and the food community.

In 1961 Beard was pleased to welcome Julia Child and Simone Beck, the co-authors of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, as guests at one of his classes. He was particularly taken with Child, who returned to the school the following year as a visiting instructor on her way to achieving stardom in the food community herself. Like Brown, Child and her husband, Paul, became dear friends of Beard.

In the late 1970s Beard used his newspaper column to introduce Louisiana chef Paul Prudhomme and Cajun cuisine to the American public.

Beard returned to television in 1965 with *The James Beard Show*. The syndicated program, with five episodes per week, was taped in Canada, giving Beard a very difficult schedule as he juggled that with his writing, teaching, and extensive traveling. The show lasted approximately a year and a half. Thereafter, Beard did not attempt the rigors of hosting his own program, but he remained in the eye of the American public with regular guest appearances on *The Mike Douglas Show*.

By 1970 Beard, who had always fought a losing battle with his weight, was suffering health problems because of it, including high blood pressure and varicose veins. The following year a heart attack landed him in the hospital for a month of convalescence. Nevertheless, by the end of the year he published what he considered his masterwork, *James Beard's American Cookery*, a compendium of some 1,500 recipes that ran to almost 900 pages.

Beard bought a four-story townhouse in Greenwich Village in 1972 and moved in, along with his comely, efficient, and personable houseman, Clay Triplette. There was a separate apartment for Colfacci, who had long since given up architecture and drifted from one job to another, sometimes teaching lessons on pastry at the cooking school.

Joining the household in 1974 was a young man named Carl Jerome, a former cabbie whom Beard had hired as a driver but who soon became his lover and constant companion, assisting him in ways ranging from pushing the wheelchair that he frequently needed to use to doing the cooking at classes under his direction.

Despite increasing medical problems, Beard kept up an exhausting schedule of travel in both Europe and the United States. Included were trips to give classes in San Francisco and Gearhart. Beard had always maintained a close relationship with friends from Oregon and never lost his affection for the region. He was especially gratified when the mayor honored him by proclaiming September 20, 1974 as James Beard Day in Portland. He was also very pleased when Reed College, which had expelled him so long before, awarded him an honorary doctorate in June 1976.

Beard was smitten with Jerome, but the younger man was far from popular with Beard's friends and associates, who complained that he limited their access to Beard and stated their belief that he was exploiting his relationship with Beard for personal aggrandizement. Beard would hear nothing against him, though, until July 1976, when he was hospitalized in San Francisco with a pulmonary embolism that could have been fatal. When Jerome left him there to return to New York to meet another lover, Beard solicited and heeded the advice of his friends and ended his relationship with Jerome.

Beard's health became more and more fragile. He had surgery on his prostate in late 1976 and needed a further operation for a bowel obstruction the next spring. Despite these obstacles, he published his twentieth cookbook, *James Beard's Theory and Practice of Good Cooking* in 1977.

With Jerome gone, Beard engaged Richard Nimmo as his personal assistant and general factotum in 1977. There was no romantic attachment this time, but, reported Clark, Nimmo began taking Beard with him "to au courant gay bars at which [Beard] took even more than his usual delight in being recognized." Despite these forays, Beard did not make any public acknowledgement of his homosexuality.

The last member to join the Beard ménage was Percy, a tawny pug who was a gift from restaurateur Stephen Spector. Unaccustomed to pets, Beard at first did not know what to make of the playful pup who loved to bound into his lap, but the affectionate nature of the little dog soon won his heart, and Percy became a cherished companion.

Beard would put out two more books, *The New James Beard* (1981) and *Beard on Pasta* (1983). Increasingly, however, he relied on assistants to put the books into shape for publication.

In spite of his numerous health problems and many stays in the hospital, Beard, aided by a staff of capable instructors, kept up the cooking school, and he also managed an amazing amount of travel.

In August 1984, against the advice of his friends, Beard insisted upon fulfilling a commitment to give classes on a special cruise through the inside passage of Alaska. Upon his return to New York, however, he was once again hospitalized and was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and intestinal bleeding.

Once released, he made what would be his final visit home to Portland and Gearhart, where he shared a picnic with a childhood friend.

Back in New York, Beard attempted to resume his routine, teaching cooking classes and hosting a benefit dinner for charity. By the new year, though, he went into kidney failure. He initially refused dialysis but then relented. He rallied briefly, but his decline was irreversible. He died in the early hours of January 23, 1985.

According to his wishes, there was no funeral service. His body was cremated and the ashes sent to friends in Oregon who scattered them along the seaside.

Beard's will called for his house to be sold but stipulated that Colfacci have lifetime tenancy in his apartment there. When this provision put off potential buyers, Julia Child urged cooking instructor Peter Kump to organize a group to purchase the property. The James Beard Foundation, as they came to be known, officially opened the James Beard House in November 1986 with the stated mission of "provid[ing] a center for the culinary arts and . . . continu[ing] to foster the interest James Beard inspired in all aspects of food, its preparation, presentation, and, of course, enjoyment."

The Foundation now offers classes, workshops, and conferences, and it has a scholarship program. In addition, it administers the annual James Beard Foundation Awards, which recognize and honor excellence among chefs, cookbook authors, food journalists, restaurant designers, and others working in the food and beverage industry.

In his last years, Beard envisioned a second memoir, tentatively titled *Menus and Memories*, in which he planned to come out publicly as a gay man. Unfortunately, he did not get beyond making some preliminary audio-taped conversations with food writer Barbara Kafka to organize the project. Kafka presented the transcripts--including the acknowledgement of his sexual orientation--in the introduction to *The James Beard Celebration Cookbook*, published in 1990.

Over 130 of Beard's friends and admirers, including such luminaries of the food community as Julia Child, M. F.K. Fisher, Jane Grigson, Marcella Hazan, Diana Kennedy, Jeanne Owen, Jacques Pépin, Wolfgang Puck, Irma Rombauer, Jimmy Schmidt, and Burt Wolf contributed recipes and fond reminiscences of Beard.

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