

THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 16, 1988

# Keillor takes bite out of Big Apple

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NEW YORK TIMES

New York — Garrison Keillor is not easy to camouflage in a crowd, especially when it's a soigné group of evening revelers at the newly renovated Rainbow Room atop Rockefeller Center.

Towering over the scene at 6 feet 4, the creator and former host of National Public Radio's *A Prairie Home Companion* wore a bemused expression and floppy, boyish haircut that looked as if it had been styled with a sickle. He was dressed in a dark suit, club tie and a white shirt whose up-turned collar points appeared ready for imminent flight.

"This place is right out of an old movie set," he said upon entering the cavernous Art Deco ballroom, as a big band swayed behind an Andy Williams-style crooner and, in the center, a large circular dance floor slowly revolved.

From 1974 to 1987, when he folded the show, Keillor delighted millions of radio listeners with tales of the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minn. ("the little town that time forgot, and the decades cannot improve"). Upon joining the staff of *The New Yorker* magazine, he moved to Manhattan with his Danish-born wife, Ulla Skaerved, and Jason, 18 years old, his son by his first marriage.

The Rainbow Room seemed a natural introduction to the stylish New York dining scene for an expatriot from Lake Wobegon, where the zenith of gastronomy is typified by Thursday-night meat loaf at the Chatterbox Cafe ("the place that's just like home, if you were brought up that way"). Keillor is the author of three best-selling books about Lake Wobegon and its God-fearing Scandinavian inhabitants: *Happy to Be Here*, *Lake Wobegon* and *Leaving Home*.



STAR STAFF ILLUSTRATION / STEPHEN R. SMITH

We ordered an enormous shellfish platter as an appetizer. Keillor picked up a glistening raw oyster and inspected it with a combination of awe and apprehension, like a biochemist discovering a strange new life form blooming in a petri dish. "I'm supposed to just eat it like this?" he asked, adding that he had never eaten a raw oyster — "at least not knowingly."

He decided to camouflage the mollusk with a dollop of red

cocktail sauce. "Hmm, good," he declared, unconvincingly.

Keillor and his family have settled into a triplex in Chelsea. When they dine out, it is usually in a neighborhood restaurant called Miss Ruby's Cafe on Eighth Avenue. "It's a friendly, comfortable place where you can see them cooking the food you are going to eat," he observed.

The conversation turned to food preferences in the Middle West versus the East. As a boy,

Keillor tended a vegetable garden. "If you grow up with that experience it is hard to ever feel the same about store-bought food," he said.

Sweet corn in late summer is one of his fondest food memories. "We would literally start the pot of water boiling before we picked the corn," he said. He admitted to flirting with vegetarianism, "but only for short periods, maybe 15 or 20 minutes, and mostly in between meals."

From the Rainbow Room's menu Keillor chose the classic tournedos Rossini with pommes soufflées, not exactly a specialty at the Chatterbox.

Here in New York, with his wife busy during the day as a social worker, Keillor often assumes cooking duties. "I'm a basic *Better-Homes-and-Gardens*-type of cook," he said.

Chef Keillor shies away from cooking seafood for an eminently practical reason: "With fish you only get one chance at cooking it right, where with ribs or chill you have miles and miles of leeway."

His most vivid fish memory is of Lake Superior smelts. "We would go out to the lake in late March and catch them, then take them, bread them and cook them," he recalled. "It was almost a biblical experience."

While Keillor said that he moved to New York in part to be anonymous, the tactic has not always worked. As he walked out to the restaurant lobby, a woman wearing a silk evening gown and an expression of unbridled awe approached him.

"Aren't you Stephen King?" she gasped with a thick Tennessee drawl.

The bard of Minnesota looped his long farm-boy arm around her bared shoulder and replied: "Why, of course, Miss. Where did you get that lovely Southern accent?"