

## Creative Creatures

*The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.*

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### **# 17 / Ron Guijs, chef de cuisine, Ambroseli, Kenya**

He used to work as a chef in his birthplace Rotterdam, in Paris, France, and at a beach restaurant in Scheveningen, the Dutch seaside resort town which is to The Hague what beach town Venice is to Los Angeles. Only the weather is somewhat different. Oh, there is no muscle beach, either. My son Mizja met him there and learned Ron Guijs was obsessed with the Hopi culture and planning to fly west and explore the Hopi mesa villages in Arizona. “My dad lives in New Mexico, that’s not too far from northern Arizona—go visit him,” advised Mizja. And this is what Ron did. He knocked on our door a few days after one snowy Christmas, had driven from the Hopi Reservation straight to Abiquiu.

He had flown in before Christmas, rented a car, and driven to Kycotsmovi and from there to the Tribal Office, where he knocked on the door and introduced himself and explained that he—who had read so much about the Hopi and studied the Hopi culture—was hoping he could spend the holidays with a Hopi family. “Sure,” they said and made a few phone calls. “They will come and get you--it will take an hour or so.” Ron stayed with his Hopi family on Second Mesa for ten days and I am sure they never had a Christmas like this one, with this young Dutch chef serving them one delicious meal after the other. In between meals, they took him around on the Reservation and taught him how to make kachinas, Hopi walking sticks, and traditional tomahawks. He learned a few words in the Hopi language too.

For two weeks Ans and I were fêted by our private chef. Ron insisted he prepare great meals three times a day and only once in a while Ans was allowed to take over the reign of the kitchen. We hiked in the snow to red rock structures out in the Piedra Lumbre Basin and climbed high mesas. Ron made us a tomahawk and a kachina walking stick we took with us to Kansas, and which are so well made they are not distinguishable from any original Hopi artifact. We had a good time and learned worthy things about the art of cooking; and Ron didn't leave doing the dishes to us, either. After he had left to fly back to the Netherlands, I emailed my son and asked him to, please, please send us more friends like Ron.

Some five years later—meanwhile we had built our own house near Barranca—on a September day, Ron knocked on our door again, this time unannounced; he had just felt the need to come and visit us. What a surprise! He had been living in the US for two years already and was the proud owner of a green card. Austin, Texas, was his hometown—after staying in a few other cities including on the East Coast. He had worked as a chef in restaurants, but had lately become a private chef, working for wealthy Texans who exchanged chefs amongst each other so never to get bored at the dinner table. His present job was as a private chef for one Texas lady who wanted him to experiment in the kitchen and surprise her, and sometimes her friends, three times a day with something totally new. Ron could buy the best ingredients he wanted and have fresh seafood jet-planned in if needed. “I’m having a great time—I mean, who can experiment in such leisure, receive so much appreciation, and then collect a great salary as well? And all this without the pressure of a demanding restaurant with all tables sold three times over and a stressed-out kitchen staff to keep under control.” Nevertheless, he did not expect to continue much longer, he needed some fresh adventure in his life.

Ron had arrived three days before Ans celebrated her birthday and when he was invited to stay for the party, he immediately offered to cook for our friends and us. How could we resist? For fourteen dinner guests a five course, fingerlickin’ great dinner was prepared and served by Ron himself. To some this may sound as nothing special, but remember we were living in the middle of nowhere, an hour’s drive from the better markets. What a memorable dinner party it was ...

Ron drove back to Austin. Later, we heard he was working as a restaurant chef again, this time in New York City, I believe. Much later we got news that he was living in Nairobi, Kenya; that he had married; and that a baby was on its way. At first, he ran the kitchen for the posh Brew Bistro & Lounge, with its “Pan-Global” cuisine veering away from the then pop trend in Nairobi of “fusion” restaurants. Beer battered seafood tempura served on a bed of deep fried kale (Sukuma) with a sprinkling of sesame seeds, things like that. The kale was to give the dish a unique twist. His Tree Tomato sorbet with crumbed mozzarella was said to be a nice palette cleanser to prepare for the main dish and had an exciting hot and cold contrast. Culinary sophistication, indeed.

Recently, Ron moved to the Kenya countryside, meaning a place with a view of the Kilimanjaro, to become the manager and chef at a high-end wilderness resort, Tawi Lodge, in Ambroseli National Park, near the Maasai Mara. I am afraid he will never surprise us by knocking on our door again—although, with Ron one never knows where and when he will turn up. How welcome he is ...