

# MEMORIES

**I**T TOOK A BLIND MAN to make me see the world in a different way. The man was Roy Andries de Groot, a food writer who was part of sweeping changes in American cuisine that began in the late 1960s with the advent of food popularizers like James Beard, Craig Claiborne, and Julia Child. Although he never quite attained a place in that pantheon, de Groot contributed eight books and hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles to American culinary literature between the mid-1950s and 1983—now largely forgotten; only one of his books remains in print (see box, page 32)—and inspired scores, if not hundreds, of other writers and chefs.

The London-born de Groot (his father was Dutch), who worked as a BBC radio writer until he became partially blind as a result of improperly healed eye surgery, was a larger-than-life character, grand in taste, dress, and language, challenging in attitude, determined in every way to control his own destiny. Occasionally he called himself Baron de Groot, which seemed to impress the French. He said the title originated with a Dutch ancestor; I refrained from inquiring more deeply into its provenance.

As his vision worsened (he lost his sight completely in 1960), de Groot searched for a profession he could handle. He found it in food writing, where he could blend his literary skills with his highly developed sense of taste. He had traveled widely in Europe, and he once said, "I know what a sun-flecked forest looks like, and I know what a provincial French restaurant looks like. All I need now is someone to tell me what they see."

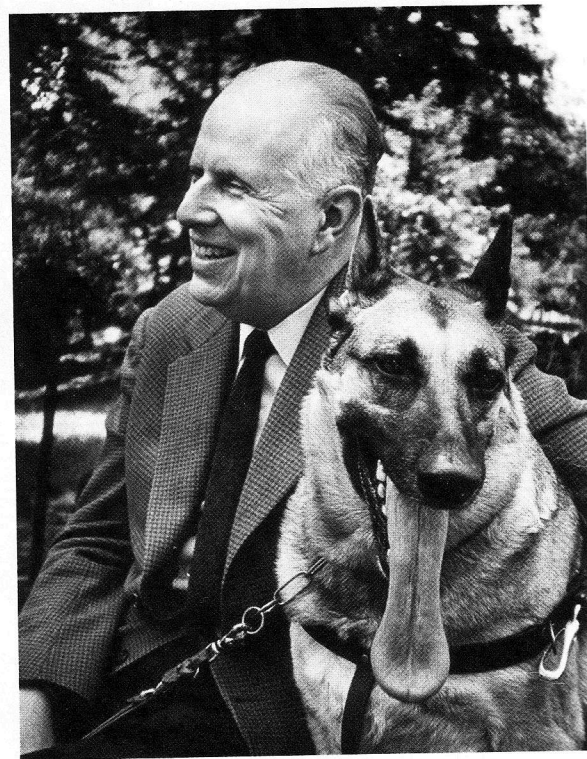
I was his occasional companion on trips to Europe, and telling him what I saw was part of my job. Describing a country inn or a mountain forest to him as we raced over the Alps to dine at Girardet forced me to improve my powers of ob-

servations. Of course, the words that emerged in print were always an improvement over my reports. His greatest compliment, he once told me, came from Arnold Gingrich, the founding editor of *Esquire*—for which de Groot wrote some of his best pieces—who, after reading his latest submission one day, announced, "Roy, your article is great. I salivated seven times."

## FEELING FOOD

*Roy Andries de Groot was blind, imperious, and brilliant—and could eat, and write, with the best*

BY MORT HOCHSTEIN



De Groot and Nusta in Manhattan in 1970.

MORT HOCHSTEIN, a New York-based wine and food writer who produced TV appearances for Roy Andries de Groot, was an editor and the beverage columnist for *Nation's Restaurant News* for 18 years.

Stockli's Stonehenge Inn in Connecticut. The next day he went back on a regime of salad and boiled egg, his frequent diet at home.

His sense of taste was extraordinary. He often amazed food professionals by analyzing the makeup of a dish after a single bite. Although he couldn't see what he was eating, he worked out a system that allowed him to keep track of his companions' observations: he asked

De Groot's impressions of food and wine, and the remarks of those who accompanied him on his investigations (as he liked to call them), went immediately into a pocket tape recorder, to be transcribed by a secretary or by his wife, Katherine Hynes—an actress who had left the national company of *My Fair Lady* to become his full-time aide. He once told me that the recording of his notes and interviews had saved him from legal action by those who thought he had misquoted or libeled them.

While many reviewers prefer to dine anonymously, de Groot took a different tack: he called ahead. "We let the restaurant know that de Groot is coming and give them a chance to take their strongest shot," he explained. "I make my judgments on that basis." Anonymity would have been impossible anyway for this giant man with his booming voice and seeing-eye dog. Calling ahead also meant that the house might pick up the tab in those cases where de Groot, seldom far ahead of his next check, was not on expenses. "He would have fainted if we ever gave him a bill," claims one restaurateur.

DE GROOT was six foot six and heavy; occasionally his weight ballooned up near 300 pounds. There was no delicate tasting of tiny morsels at de Groot's table. I once watched him eat his way through an entire spring menu at Albert