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The *savoir*-

Hedda Dowd finds the good

By MARIANA GREENE

Staff Writer

What's the most interesting facet of Hedda Gioia Dowd's rich life? Is it that she roasts Sunday chickens on an 18th-century *tournebroche*, an iron cooking device, in the family room fireplace? That she trades in heirloom chateau linens and silver bought directly from old French families? Or that a current fancy is baking breads started with living cultures of fermented fruits?

Ms. Dowd may live in a fast-food nation, but she doesn't let a little snag like reality intrude on her world of slow food, family meals, heirloom possessions, refined manners and old-world niceties.

Although she was born and reared a Southerner in Memphis, Ms. Dowd considers her French mother's native culture even more genteel — and worth emulating. On her buying trips to France, far removed from the fashionable streets of Paris, Ms. Dowd is certain to rent rooms for her stay that include at least a cookstove if not a full kitchen. After her day's formal calls to acquire inventory, she prepares a supper of duck, fresh fish or goose liver, interesting vegetables, bread and regional cheeses she bought that morning at a village market and pretends that's her day-to-day life.

When she's back home in Dallas, Ms. Dowd, a wife and mother, goes to considerable effort to simulate the local-food experience that is a way of life in the Périgord. She thinks nothing of the daily marketing that takes her to one store for parbaked, frozen baguettes, another store for organic vegetables, an Asian market on Harry Hines for seasonal berries and a second-generation Italian grocer in Old East Dallas for the "best truffle cheese in the city."

"I wake up every day and think about the three meals I'm going to have," says Ms. Dowd, who lives in northwest Dallas. "I had a French mother who loved



Photos by NATALIE CAUOILL/STEF

For centuries, France has been a producer of highest-quality flax, the source of linen. Elaborate monograms from chateaux are coveted for the workmanship, not to match a new owner's initial.

-vivre secret

ie in her inherited French culture



Everything meaningful for Hedda Dowd begins with food. "I can't imagine my child coming into his house and not smelling something cooking. That's what home is."



An antique rotisserie is a standard fixture on the Dowds' hearth. "Meat always tastes better on a wood fire. We grilled everything on a grate in the fireplace when I was a child."

to cook and who exposed me to wonderful food my whole life. The food is what the core is for me. It's not hard for me to be passionate about what I'm selling."

Antique Harvest, founded in 1997, is an online source for French antiques used for everyday living and entertaining in the realms of the kitchen, dining room, bedroom and bath. Not peasant living, though. Ms. Dowd's inventory comes from chateaux, manoirs and "very fine farmhouses" and dates as far back as the 18th century. ("The French government doesn't want things older than that leaving the country.")

She procures hand-embroidered (by nuns) linen sheets, tablecloths, napkins and pillowcases; antique silver flatware and table accessories; chateau and farm bells of iron; and rare collectibles for the kitchen, such as duck and butter presses, baguette-slice toasters and a contraption that latches onto a kitchen tabletop to swab out wine bottles for reuse. Recently she has intensified her search for grilling implements and wine accessories.

"These are things you can't buy new," she explains. "They don't make them anymore."

Ms. Dowd developed her 5-year-old niche boutique business out of need — the need to connect with her heritage, to infuse her family life with the same home-centered rituals she experienced as a child and to nurture appreciation for family legacies in her son, who's less than a year away from leaving home.

Her late mother, says Ms. Dowd, was an extraordinary cook with an eye for presentation. Her maternal grandfather was in the linen business in France, and her paternal grandfather founded a pasta company in the United States after emigrating from Sicily.

In addition to the deep familial connections her business represents, Ms. Dowd readily acknowledges pure sensory delight in the goods she acquires and sells. She's convinced there are plenty of potential customers — men and women — who share her appreciation for the relics of a genteel existence, be they born to it or not. And thanks to the Internet, the Web (antiqueharvest.com) and search engines such as Google, the entrepreneur snags clients from around the world. For local customers, she maintains a booth at Lost Antiques, 1201 N. Industrial Blvd., and shows by appointment (214-351-1425).

"They revel in the fact that these pieces have a story, and they want to add their story to them," says Ms. Dowd. "They want to gather pieces from all over the world that mean something, not instant decoration."

Brides, architects, interior designers and Middle Eastern sheiks are among the customers for antique and vintage French table silver for sale. Ms. Dowd wanted a rustic stone sink in her remodeled kitchen (below). Frank Clements, trained as an architect but who prefers to work as a master craftsman, fabricated the look out of cast concrete (kfclements@sbcglobal.net).



WHAT'S NEXT?

Food fuels Ms. Dowd's entrepreneurial energy. She plans to open a restaurant with a one-item menu: soufflés. Sweet and savory soufflés would be available for lunch and dinner, but not to go. Her partners are Mark Maguire, owner of Maguire's North Dallas and Maguire's Uptown restaurants, and Cherif Brahmî of Lyon, France. They're hoping to open by next summer.

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My customer isn't one who's acquiring things that are pretty. She wants a piece of silver to add her own fingerprints to it."

A Frenchwoman's home-keeping skills, no matter her station in life, were the measure by which she was judged a suitable marriage prospect and, later, a wife. "The French have an aesthetic for the table and the bed that hasn't been matched," the businesswoman says. "Linens were a woman's dowry, a woman's worth, what she represented to the marriage. So she began accumulating them at age 6 or 7."

Household linens

France is the world's major flax producer, from



Photos by NATALIE CAUDILL/Staff Photographer

which linen is made, and it is deemed the best quality. The very best, Ms. Dowd has learned, is grown in Caux, on deposits of calcium carbonate. There the flax flowers are a vivid blue, and the bluer the flower, it turns out, the stronger the flax's fibers.

Linen becomes softer with washing while retaining its strength and shape, useful characteristics for objects subjected to frequent laundings. Modern flax fibers are not as durable. And "the feel of old linen against your skin is like nothing else. If you've never slept in a bed with real linens, you're missing out on one of the great pleasures in life."

The caress of heirloom linen and the beauty of the handwork are equally valued among Antique Harvest's clientele. "If the handwork wasn't done by nuns, the linen maids did it. And that era is gone."

Extravagantly florid monograms may boast initials seven inches in length. So-called "duchess" napkins are 43 inches by 35 inches, and bedsheets are 95 inches wide.

Beginning in the 14th century, initials were stamped on household cloths using a homemade red, indelible ink. Later, tiny initials stitched in red threads replaced the stamped identification, a necessary labeling device when wives or maids took the family linens to the river bank or village square's fountain for communal wash day.

"In France, red is the symbol of the blood of life," she explains, "which is why the tiny initials in the corners of French linens are stitched in red threads." Through centuries, even a humble farmer planted a few acres of flax and hemp "so his daughters would



have their own yarn to use for embroidery" on household linens. Needlework skills were handed down from mother to daughter or taught to schoolgirls by nuns.

At table

Well-born French brides also included table silver in their dowries. Although Ms. Dowd carries some silver that is equivalent to British sterling, by far her inventory of forks, knives and spoons is silver plate. "But European silver plate," she explains, "is a much different quality — much heavier, oversized in scale — than American flatware."

Ms. Dowd specializes in classic patterns made by French silversmiths for centuries. She buys whole sets of "Filet" and "Baguette," each in its original wooden case. "I don't get very frilly. That's not my taste."

A set consisted of 12 dinner forks, soup spoons and dessert spoons, plus a ladle. Brides purchased dinner knives separately, choosing silver, bone, horn or wood handles. Later she added serving pieces, including delicate little specialties that befuddle modern Americans: absinthe spoons; a *poudreuse* for dusting a tart with powdered sugar; a juice press; petite, hand-forged corkcraws men kept in their pockets to open wine bottles.

Nowadays, family members of several generations live in manors on a large estate that is a working farm and vineyard. Maybe 30 people, ages 6 to 90, gather every Sunday for dinner. "There's a toaster grill in every fireplace. The chairs at the table don't match, the plates don't match, the flatware doesn't match. And when the food is presented," says Ms. Dowd, "it's all right. What's being shared at the table is the essence of the meal."

Family meals are mandatory in the Dowd household, but her son, Andre, a high school senior, doesn't balk. He brings his friends home for dinner, and they are more than willing to sit at Hedda's table and meet

the parents.

"I can't imagine my child coming into his house and not smelling something cooking," says Ms. Dowd. "That's what home is."

Culture shock

Hedda Dowd dreamed up this business called Antique Harvest because she was determined to find a reason to be in France frequently. She had spent her childhood summers with her grandmother and, later, stayed with her mother for a couple of weeks at her annual summer rental.

"I love going there so much," says Ms. Dowd. "How could I not make a business out of it? The quality I seek is not going to be abundant forever."

Instead of antiques dealers, Ms. Dowd buys directly from landowners, selecting inventory from generations of a family's possessions. She combs southwest France by canvassing villages of 300 inhabitants and making appointments with owners of 1,000-year-old houses.

A massive chateau might have a dozen bedrooms, but today's cost of maintaining and operating such a structure could require the owner to shut down all but three. The French will sell their heirlooms in order to fund repairs. Dozens of sheets and sets of silver that are never used seem a small sacrifice to keep the ancestral home intact.

Manners are formally and meticulously observed. You are expected to arrive at the appointed time. To interrupt a meal is "the ultimate sacrilege," says Ms. Dowd. "I'm in the middle of nowhere. I have no sense of direction, and that's with a GPS. Thank God I have the language skill. Otherwise, I don't think I'd be doing this."

"But I'll drive anywhere for food," she quickly adds. "It all starts with food."

Esoteric implements, such as the *poudreuse* for sifting powdered sugar on sweets (left), reflect a culture where family life centered on the table.

In addition to heirloom French silver and linens, Ms. Dowd is the exclusive U.S. rep for the German fireplace in the background (below). The modular grill is made of concrete, quartz and reinforced steel (\$1,300 plus freight).



HEDDA'S LITTLE BLACK BOOK

Carnival flagship store, 3434 W. Illinois Ave. at Westmoreland, for cure-your-own fresh olives, salsas, tortilla chips and rabbit.

Central Market, 5750 E. Lovers Lane at Greenville, cheese counter for knowledgeable help choosing from among 1,000 cheeses.

Jimmy's Food Store, 4901 Bryan St., for truffle cheese, Parmigiano-Reggiano, pecorino, ready-made pizza dough, Italian wines, Italian heavy cream and Mama's meatballs.

Kuby's, 6601 Snider Plaza, for German sausages, unseasoned hamburger patties and Lachs Schinken (dried, cured pork to wrap around fresh figs or prunes).

Pogo's Wine & Spirits, 5360 W. Lovers Lane, for matching wines to a menu.

Rex's Fresh Seafood Market, 5200 W. Lovers Lane, for standard and unusual fish and shellfish.

Taj Mahal Imports, 100 S. Central Expressway in Richardson, for basmati rice sold in zippered bags, cardamom, peppercorns in a rainbow of colors and other exotic, hard-to-find spices.

Tart, 5219 W. Lovers Lane, for tarts, brownies, cookies and wedding cakes.