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Amid the Orchids, A Feast for Nero And the Wolfe Pack

By FRED FERRETTI NOV. 9, 1977

Nero Wolfe, everybody agreed, would have been delighted with the entire evening, except of course for the hors d'oeuvres and cocktails, to which the great man would have said “Phui!” Archie Goodwin, on the other hand, would probably have mingled genially with the assortment of mystery buffs, sipping a bourbon or two while Fritz was preparing the Duck Mondor.

There were three kinds of orchids on the pink-draped dining tables—white and lavender cattleya, pink and yellow oncidium and orange epidendron—all of which Theo Horstmann raised in the three-room hothouse atop Nero Wolfe's brownstone on West 35th Street, and among which Wolfe searched daily for mealybugs and aphids.

There were beer-bottle candelabra on each table because the sedentary detective, whose weight fluctuated between 250 and 340 pounds, in between solving case after case by sheer brainpower, drank, according to one buff, three cases a day. And there were centerpieces of caviar tins, brie boxes, apples, radishes, green peppers and breadsticks —symbolic, it was said, of the fictional Wolfe's vast and varied appetite. And propped up in the pink napkins were cardboard .45-caliber pistols.

It was the very first Nero Wolfe dinner, in an opulent setting at The Lotus Club at 5 East 66th Street just off Fifth Avenue last week. The people at Murder Ink, the West Side mystery bookstore, who sponsored it hope that it becomes an observance, the high point of the creation of a new organization to be called The Wolfe Pack.

The evening was called, “Maitre D'tective: Rex Stout,” in honor of the late creator of Nero Wolfe and Archie, and honored John McAleer, who has written a

book called, “Rex Stout: A Biography” just published by Little, Brown and Company, The Wolfe fans came from all over to be at The Lotus Club.

Mr. McAleer was there to tell the 131 guests—who included mystery writers Dorothy Salisbury Davis, William d'Andrea, Otto Penzler, co-author of the Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection, Eleanor’ Sullivan, editor of

Flery Queen magazine, and Dilys Winn, founder of Murder Ink and author of a mystery-history called oddly enough, “Murder Ink”—how Rex Stout happened to approve a biography.

In honor of Wolfe, there were four yellow shirts and a yellow blouse.

Mr. McAleer said, “Rex said he'd like the biography because ‘in a book about Nero and Archie I'd just be a hangeron, but in a book about me they'll have to stand until I sit.’”

Paul Hostetter, who has read all of Mr. Stout's Nero Wolfe books, “most of them twice,” flew in for the dinner from Detroit, thought about having a martini, but settled for Scotch because “Wolfe thought anybody who drank gin was a barbarian.” John Messenger, from London, wore formal clothes, “Simply because I thought it appropriate for Nero.”

Lou Trapani, Nancy Sans, Del Setzer and Kathleen Walsh were there, all wearing orchids, because of Nero and because it was Kathleen's birthday, and Mary Gendron flew in from California “because I can buy mysteries by driving 25 miles into the Los Angeles Basin, but it seems so much easier flying into New York.”

Steve Rothman came in because he wanted to discuss the Stout books with others, including Susan Dahlinger, barred from the Baker Street Irregulars because of her sex, who is a member of a new protest group, Adventuresses of Sherlock Holmes. There was one yellow blouse—in honor of Wolfe, who slept in yellow silk pajamas, wore two yellow shirts each day, and owned five yellow robes—and four men stood to applause because they wore yellow shirts.

They all came into the second-floor library of the Lotus Club about 6:30 P.M. and stood chatting with Mr. McAleer, looking at the shelves of books, drinking the hated cocktails and eating corn chips, vegetables and dip, a course called, because of the library, “Murder By the Book,” one of the Wolfe books.

Carol Brener, owner of the bookstore, spent much of the early evening apologizing—more to Wolfe, it seemed, than to her guests who paid \$37.50 for the

evening—for having a cocktail hour. Then, at 7:23, the library lights dimmed. Or was it 7:24? Or 7:25? There was disagreement.

At any rate, the guests filed from the lobby into the dining room, a graywalled chamber with decorated plaster ceiling, two unlighted chandeliers and chairs that were half Chippendale reproduction, half folding metal, and sat down. Bouillon was brought in, “Bouillon, Our Own” from “Might As Well Be Dead,” (recipe in “The Nero Wolfe Cookbook” published by Viking) which should be made from beef chuck, veal knucklebones, peppercorns, leaks and varied, ingredients of a bouquet garni.

It was greeted, however, with, “the curare is missing” and “they left out one knucklebone.”

This was followed by Duck Mondor, created by Mr. Wolfe's close friend and restaurateur, Pierre Mondor, tomato tarts from the very first Nero Wolfe hook, “Fer-de-Lance,” and rice croquettes from “Too Many Cooks.” The duck, baked with celery, onions, apples, lemon, In a sauce of white wine, egg yolks, cream, cognac, nutmeg, pistachio nuts and Gruyere cheese, was well-received, as were the tiny, crusted tarts, Missing from the croquettes, and duly noted, were the quince jelly centers that Nero's cook, Fritz, would have insisted upon.

Salad was watercress and tomatoes topped with Mr. Wolfe's salad dressing, from “Over My Dead Body,” a dressing that reminded one of egg salad, heaven forbid! And the wine was a French claret with new labels declaring it to be from Mr. Wolfe's own “Black Mountain Vineyard” Its red color accounted for its alleged source, “Royal Flush.”

Coffee was from “If Death Ever Slept” and brandy from “The Final Deduction.”

Toasts were offered to Mr. Stout's widow, Pola Stout, and her daughters, Rebecca and Barbara, by Dorothy Davis; by Miss Winn to Nero Wolfe; by private detective Tony Spiesman to Archie Goodwin, “who so generously gave to us the incomparable Nero Wolfe”; by Mr. McAleer to Mr. Stout, “a king by right as well as by Rex.” And then it was over.

Except for Mr. Messenger, who asked, “Why not a toast to Fritz? After all, he prepared the meal?”

Satisfactory, Mr. Messenger. Most satisfactory.

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