

Can a macrobiotic restaurant be strictly kosher?

by Joanna Rotté

Within the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) is found the hexagram Ting. The Caldron, based on the idea of nourishing worthy men and women. Within New York City's Lower East Village is found the Caldron, "Not Just a Restaurant But a Way of Life," based on the idea of nourishing those who choose to become worthy men and women. Owner, maitre d', substitute dishwasher and cashier, liaison, new gadgeteer and handyman, Marty Schloss, creator of the Caldron restaurant, is a young type of individual who practices his own meld of macrobiotics and Judaism. Using talking as a yin outlet, a means of "letting off steam and breathing a lot," he is both relaxed and energized by conversation. It enables him "to give something to someone who wants it." What this reporter wanted was the history of the restaurant, which he delivered in rapid-speed Brooklynese from under an early-Dylan cap and from behind a thick black beard, while we lounged on the floor of the Caldron's Japanese-style rear dining room.

In 1969, when Marty conceived the Caldron, his purpose was to provide creatively prepared, high-quality natural foods at reasonable prices in an atmosphere different from that of the other macrobiotic restaurant operating on East 6th Street, the Paradox. Feeling that the Paradox appealed primarily to the radical fringe, he wanted an establishment where "people could take their families or dates without someone coming over and trying to give them a massage or a Scientology test." Day by day, year by year, the Caldron has attracted its own chorus of characters. Yet, due to a policy of barring "the stoned who want to nod or fall out," the strange and the straight have managed to merge within the small but not crowded, cozy but not tight, nonostentatious atmosphere that is the Caldron. Alone, as couples or in groups, its patronage, un mindful of age, encompasses cultural backgrounds from the Hasidic Jew to the Taoist, and professional levels from the unemployed to the full-time celebrity. Marty thinks the harmonious blend is attributable to a common purpose "to function on the best possible level or on a better level than they have been." They are people "into themselves, conscious of

themselves," who have "a personal, humanistic interest in being healthy," based on a belief that "unless you are well you can't go onto other things." Before opening, Marty seized in on the kind of clientele he wanted to attract by looking to the stars to determine the most propitious birth-date for the restaurant. Two astrological charts were computed, each a week apart. The first predicted a jet set group, which he declined because "they're fly-by-night, can't be counted on," in favor of the second collection, "intellectuals and artists, nice funky people." What he has gotten, he feels, are pioneers, archetypal individuals who "are doing something for themselves that is not hop-on-the-bandwagon philosophizing." These people, "through their appearance and action rather than by verbosity, pass on a vibe, a by-product of their lifestyle that becomes evident in each one's special walk of life." They are explorers using the Caldron as a watering place to begin and further relationships. Their exchanges are "mild and quiet and gentle"—so much so that although "the place might be completely filled, if you have your back to the major tables you'd think it was empty." It is this intimacy, this feedback between him and the customers that continues to give Marty his *raison d'être* at the Caldron and his pleasure in management.

Because of his affection for people, Marty was for a long time intimidated by the notion of becoming a stereotypical businessperson. After expending much energy "fighting it," he finally allowed himself the opportunity to "find out once and for all if I'm one of those guys who, if he makes it, becomes an ogre, a business monster. If so, then I'll have to deal with it." He "took the plunge," and although "in the beginning it was a little difficult because of ashtrays being stolen, plates disappearing, and food being wasted," he found to his surprise a solution to the problem of theft and loss. Rather than "using a whip" whereby the proprietor "gets an ulcer and the customers get uptight," his way is through "explanation and understanding," so that the choice to be considerate "comes from them." Because "if you give them the yang (assertion) they may not be ready to deal with it, but if you give them the yin (reception) they can always yang-

ize it themselves." Consequently, even though it is his source of income, Marty does not characterize the Caldron as a strictly professional business operation based on an economic principle. He could, he realizes, "be employing fewer people, serving smaller portions or lower-quality ingredients and making more money." But preferring to focus on people's welfare, he adheres to a principle of quality, in order to assure himself that "when I go to sleep at night I don't have to toss and turn and be uncomfortable, because I know I'm doing the right thing."

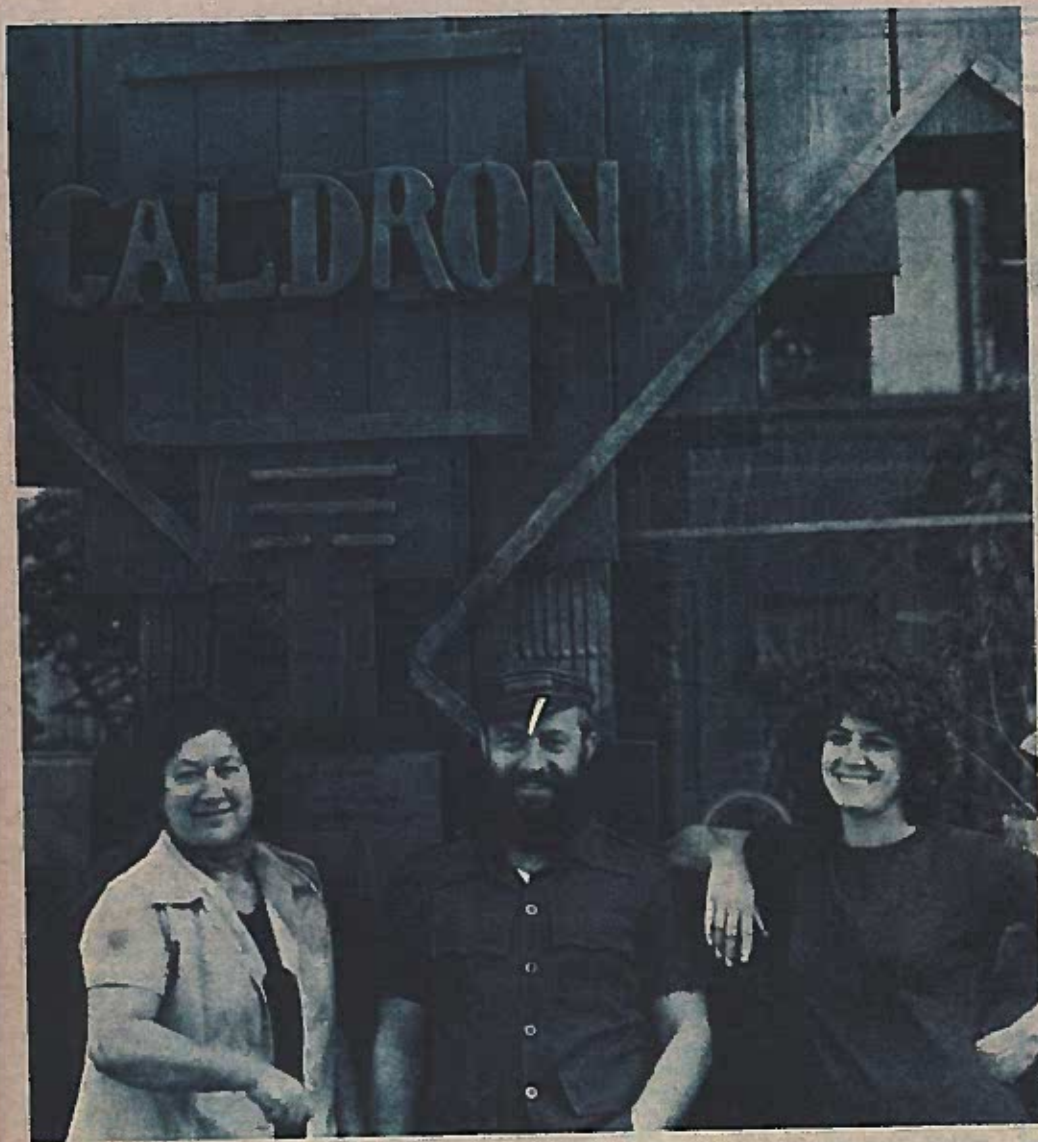
Still, the Caldron's books do balance: they manage to stay out of the red. But that, Marty believes, is solely because it's a family operation. His attractive, hard-working wife, Glory, does the cooking; his energetic Jewish mamma, Cyna, takes care of the baking; he himself looks after the maintenance and management. Whereas "there have been half a dozen similar restaurants that opened up and lasted less than a year because of absentee ownership or only one working owner," the Caldron, thanks to its family trio, has survived. When he and Glory met, they were each just getting into macrobiotics. Both had cooked before (and Marty had run a restaurant in Israel when he was twenty), but neither knew anything about macrobiotic cooking. For practice, they began to invite people home, fifteen at a time, to partake of nitrate vegetables with tahini sauce, fried rice, noodles, casseroles, and various tempura dishes. These dinners germinated the Caldron.

At first Cyna was still more interested in meat and sugar than in grains and vegetables, so the initial triangular partnership was composed of Marty, Glory, and a colorful but ultimately unreliable friend. A heroin addict just out of jail for attempted murder, the friend acceded wholeheartedly to the idea of macrobiotic cooking: he weaned himself off methadone in favor of clean, wholesome food and lost forty pounds while helping to build the restaurant. In short, he was "beginning to become a human being," but, resentfully pestered by relatives who insisted he "would never last," he eventually

bowed his will to their negativity. Within a month after the Caldron opened, "he was back on junk, nodding out at the steam table." Heedless of those who warned him, "You'll never get rid of this guy, because he'll want to milk the place," Marty honestly explained to his friend that if he stayed, the Caldron would fail. But if he left with his investment reimbursed and a little profit, they could make it; the friend accepted "very kindly," and the Caldron became the Schloss family business.

For the first two years, as business increased and the call for their deserts and pastries grew, Marty and Glory "worked twenty hours a day, seven days a week." All the while they silently eyed the Chinese laundry next door as a potential bakery. The break came one suspicious day when Marty stopped by and the owner said, "I want to move out of here—you know anybody who would want to rent this store?" Marty told him to look no further, then swiftly collected some profits from the restaurant to secure the lease, "put a floor down, shoves up and had the bakery going." The bakery's success put even more demands on their time. Both he and Glory were "baking, cooking, washing, running, and shopping" so much that they "couldn't handle it anymore." It was then that Marty asked his mother to join them. Cyna walked into the bakery and ordered, "All right, give me the butter, the eggs, the milk, the sugar, the orange juice, and the peanut oil." He replied, "No, I'm sorry, you can't use butter, egg, milk, sugar, orange juice, and peanut oil; we have stone-ground wheat flour, apple juice, apple concentrate, corn, and lots of other vegetable oils." She quipped, "What do you want me to make, bricks? You can't bake anything with that."

She had a point. Up until then the Caldron's baked goods "were healthy but not really pastries, for it was the era of macrobiotic deserts when "a little cookie would weigh a half-pound—which was fine if people were really into chewing, but some weren't." Undaunted by the limitations imposed by these new ingredients, Cyna took over. "When she started, the stuff looked good but didn't taste so great; then it tasted great but didn't look so good; but within a year it looked great and tasted great." Cyna is hailed as inventor of the popular (and very delicious) tofu pies and "cheese" cake. Some time after Cyna's discoveries of the manifold uses of tofu, Marty's Japanese tofu supplier, unable to contain his curiosity any longer, asked Marty what they did with all the tofu. Marty explained, "We make cake out of it." The man couldn't believe it: "You make cake out of tofu? You're supposed to put it in soup." He visited the bakery, tasted the cake, and still couldn't believe it.



"So," he exclaimed, "it took a Polish-Jewish lady to come along and make Japanese tofu into spongecake because that's all she had to work with." The moral of the story—and of all the cooking done at the Caldron—is: "When you're unlimited, you become spaced out and chaotic; but when you're limited, you can become very creative."

It was not long before the storefront section of the ex-Chinese laundry became a grocery store as well, the Caldron's Well, stocking whole grains and grain products, beans, seaweed, organic produce, and other natural foods from the vegetable kingdom. The store's facade was fashioned as the complementary opposite to that of the restaurant. In the beginning, Marty wrongly anticipated that the whole restaurant could be set up for about \$3,000. That amount was exhausted "just carting out the garbage." When another quick \$3,000, collected in personal loans of five, ten, and fifteen dollars, went to buy nails and screws, Marty called upon the expertise of a theatrical set-designer friend, Richard Menoff; he devised a building plan, did all the carpentry, and oversaw the whole project, using Marty and friends as laborers. Luckily the methadone part-

ner "had a connection, an Italian guy, working on the docks," so they were able to cut on lumber costs by recycling planks from machinery crates, all full of nails, to build the restaurant's facade. Short (by about \$4,999) the \$5,000 needed to purchase restaurant furniture, they built their own tables from half-inch plywood, then burned the wood with propane torches to bring out the grain, added borders to give an impression of thickness, and polyurethaned the lot. In the course of the work, Richard "who had not been into good food," began eating grains and vegetables. When the restaurant opened, "he was a full-fledged macrobiotic"; he was also in love with one of the women cutting vegetables. They married and went off to make organic sauerkraut and to farm aduki beans. He left New York City the legacy of the Caldron restaurant, frontally designed in zigurat—yang triangular—form (seven steps ascending to a peak), which has since been polarized by the Well storefront's minaret—yin triangular—form.

Their yang, rustic, wooden building was ready a week prior to the restaurant's astrologically scheduled birthdate. But, alas, with the cash drawer registering obdurately empty,

there still remained one commodity to be obtained: Food! In wandered a savior in blue jeans—an editor of the *East Village Other* selling newspaper advertising space. Marty explained, "I wish we could put in an ad, but we haven't even got enough money to open up the place." The editor asked, "How much do you need, and when?" To which Marty replied, "A thousand dollars today." The editor left for the bank and returned with a thousand dollars, "because he liked the idea that something like this was opening up and wanted to see it happen." He not only gave them free half-page ads for six months, he "came every so often to wait table and wash dishes." Thus, complete with food, the Caldron premiered on the lovely day of April 18, 1969. Summer with its heat was soon upon them; since Marty "had figured it was going to be spring forever," they were without air-conditioning. Moving the tables outdoors onto the sidewalk was no solution: "It was a hassle because a lot of the neighborhood dogs came to use the table legs for johnny-pumps," and scavengers would "hit on customers eating in the street for a piece of bread." Hence, the Caldron closed for the summer of '69. It reopened for a nice, early fall, only to discover come

winter that the radiators were insufficient. Marty then had to run around searching for a heater. The frenzy to locate all that they hadn't dreamed they would need didn't really subside for about two years. As Marty recalled, "Even if we had known what we wanted, we couldn't have asked for it because we didn't know what to call it or where to get it." Still, in time, it all came to them: "Things just sort of showed up."

So did the Caldron's first professional chef. Since neither Marty nor Glory had ever prepared food for two to three hundred people, the question of proportions and what to do with a twenty-five quart pressure-cooker had them in a quandary. Fortunately, Richard Sandler, who had just resigned from Boston's macrobiotic Saise Restaurant, called looking for a job. Marty said, "Yeah, hop a cab." Down came Richard accompanied by three trained vegetable cutters and his own rich experience. "Without Richard," Marty said, "we would have really been in trouble. He enlightened us—made us change the pots and pans—and helped until we were able to improvise on our own. In the beginning, we learned from the Master."

The Caldron's free-form hiring policy hasn't altered much from the time of Richard's phone call. Although they've collected a boxful of names of prospective employees, when positions open up, they usually "wait for people to walk through the door, look at them, talk to them, put them in the kitchen or wherever, and then see." The primary requirement is "a knowledge of cooking"; moreover, most of the help has been "into vegetarianism or health food diets and interested in learning more." An exception was Taki Hyodo, present owner of the Seven Zen Macrobiotic restaurant, who came to the Caldron with restaurant experience but an acquaintance with natural foods cooking. Taki—"one of the finest workers we ever had"—worked with the Schlosses for two years, learned about the diet, used it on himself, enjoyed it, and improved visibly as the days went by. A more typical chef was Richard Price, now at the East West Cookery, who "knew something about the diet, had been into it for a while, and was sick and tired of working in hamburger joints—he wanted to eat and cook and work in a place that wouldn't interfere with his state of mind." Torron, a fine chef who has been with them on and off for the past five years, has trained a number of second cooks for the Caldron. His present assistant, Barry, is "a man who used to own a health food restaurant in a neighborhood that wasn't ready for it." The only outstanding exception to the yin/yang

consciousness that prevails at the Caldron is their dishwasher of five years. "a man from Puerto Rico who in his own way is a kind of natural: he eats very well, is into vegetables and rice and fish rather than hotdogs and cake and soda, and his good nature shows it." Because of their common interest in balanced food, the Caldron's staff "have become social friends: they hang out with each other after work—some have even moved in together." There is no separatism, no alienation in the kitchen. "It's very peaceful," says Marty, who never has to worry about his staff's ability to carry out quality work.

The Schlosses have such confidence in the vibration being put into the food by the people preparing it that they eat at the restaurant six days a week. Marty laughs. "People come in and see me eating something, and say 'I want that.' They think what the owner eats must be different from what's served to the customers. But it's exactly the same." Proprietors, staff, and clientele alike partake of dishes derived from organic grains and flours, fresh fish, and fresh vegetables, only some of which are organic "because not all vegetables are available organically and at certain times some are too high priced." Marty never lets concern for costs compromise quality, however. Drawing from his experience as an artist working with materials, Marty believes that one has "to work much harder to compensate for a lack of quality and can waste a lot of creative energy by, for example, using inferior paint that will peel off the canvas." Superior food, he finds, is the sine qua non of good cooking.

During the three months of construction before the Caldron officially opened, interest in its menu was generated along the street. On the first day it was jammed. Marty had invited Howard Smith, who writes the *Village Voice* "Scenes" column, "but it was so packed there was no room for him to sit and he couldn't get anything to eat." The problem of compactness was compounded by the unfortunate fact that all of the tables had been sized to the average height—five feet, seven inches—of the men who built them. "When normal guys—five feet, eleven inches—came in, they couldn't get their legs under the tables." One by one, the tables were removed, the legs replaced, the tables returned, while the restaurant was busy and running.

Within the first year there was considerable publicity: a write-up in the *New York Times*; a Japanese television program from Tokyo "did a shot on why a macrobiotic restaurant had opened in New York City"; scenes from *Joe* were filmed in the back room, which brought the movie fans. More customers came after Marty appeared on "To Tell the Truth" and the David Susskind show. Others were



drawn to the restaurant that had served Miles Davis, Charlie Mingus, Donovan, and Shelly Winters. John Lennon and Yoko Ono "came a number of times until John was attacked by a crazy Evangelist who held Lennon responsible for the misdirection of youth away from religion and into the drug culture; he really wanted to kill him." It was Cyna who saved John Lennon: "She got in between them and held the guy back." Whatever their motives, and despite its uneven start, patrons continued to flock to the Caldron. As Marty remembers, "It was tricky, you know, but somehow they came."

All of the Caldron's patrons have been to some degree involved in ways of eating and living that depart from the conventional. For the new seekers, it is "a halfway house, a place where you can begin to kick your junk food habit without going cold turkey." For the many folks who neither know how nor believe they have time to prepare whole foods, the restaurant can serve as a starting-point, giving them "the faith and courage to begin." If they first try at home, they may "burn the rice, dilute the kanten, get discouraged, and just drop it." But through exposure to the restaurant, they can explore the real possibility of creating imaginative culinary dishes "satisfying to the palate, the physical being, and the whole spiritual aspect." Once initiated, the explorer is free to "tighten up the belt and become more strict for the purpose of self-healing," by choosing a balanced rice and vegetable dinner while learning to cook at home. The question then is whether a macro-

biotic restaurant wouldn't be self-defeating, in that it encourages people toward self-reliance. Marty thinks not, absolutely not. "When people start to cook at home, they begin to appreciate the work and care that goes into preparing a meal. They keep returning to taste new things and continue learning." Unafraid of competition (even his own), he opened the store just so people might care for themselves at home. Recipes are freely given, for if he were "uptight and secretive," people would lose confidence in him and blame the food. "Well, look what he's eating— weird food; that makes him weird." The only thing that's self-defeating," says Marty, "is fear."

Because so many of the customers have questions about food and healing, the Caldron has become "almost a clearing house for recommendations for acupuncturists, herbalists, moxabustionists, Shiatsu massage, seminars, books . . ." Phone calls come in constantly from "someone in the middle of making a kanten or another with a swollen knee wondering how to apply an albi plaster." Still, Marty's policy is "never to diagnose specifically or put anyone on a particular diet." He does not feel sufficiently knowledgeable, for one thing, and besides, he doesn't want anyone becoming dependent on him. What he wants is for "people to clear away the debris and get back to themselves, to find that the answers are in them." The procedure of self-healing "takes patience and experimentation and perseverance," so he encourages people to read, watch, and ask questions with a wide-open mind, never accepting any transmitted information as gospel truth. "A macrobiotic diet is personal and requires

personal observation by the individual involved if he is to benefit and get any insight into what is happening." In other words, "If a person is aware of what he eats and sees the changes, he'll be able to connect the change with the food." Although he personally knows the power of macrobiotics, Marty is against proselytizing. "If you tell people something that's supposedly good for them, they become defensive and close up, not wanting to consider that for twenty years of their lives they've been doing the wrong thing." Instead, he waits for people to ask, "How come your skin is so clear? How come you have so much energy?" And from their questions, their challenges, through discussion, his own mind is forced "to work and examine the principles, to reflect and also to repair." In this way, "Sometimes the customer becomes a source of growth for the proprietor."

The concepts of freedom and change are essential to macrobiotic understanding; Marty's philosophy allows for both. In recent years he has transformed the Caldron into a Kosher as well as macrobiotic restaurant, to conform with his Hasidic beliefs. The marriage has proved a happy one. A Hasidic leader has supported Marty's goals, with a word of warning: "You should guard your soul and body. If eating natural foods will do that for you, then it's a good thing. But if it becomes a form of idol worship, it loses its ends by its means," Marty explained. "If you eat wholesome food and use the increased energy for slander, thievery, or lying, it is actually desecrated. You could eat unwholesome food and use it toward proper ends; it would be elevated and changed by the soul's power of transmutation." Thus in both macrobiotics and Hassidic Judaism, food is considered a tool, able to effect change, and not as an end in itself.

Marty's been in an ideal position to observe the changes in social attitudes toward macrobiotics over the years. "When I first got into macrobiotics, it was kind of very strict and blah and colorless and uptight. It attracted a lot of uptight people who couldn't take change. Then, when the fascination for Diet No. 7 eased off (as cynicism grew out of both factual and fictitious accounts of the deaths it had caused), a kind of balance was found. Now, again, it's rocking and swaying and making headway into the food industry, mainly because it is becoming poetic and artistic, with humor. There's been a softening-up of those hard edges." In reality, the Caldron appeals to a very small coterie in a very large city. Still it stands—in a world that seems to be destroying itself—"like an oasis" for those who have chosen to try to heal themselves as a step toward healing the world. □