

## ELSIE HENDERSON AND THE KAUFMANN FAMILY

Elsie Redmon (later Elsie Lee, then Elsie Henderson) was born at home in Pittsburgh on September 7, 1913. She is the youngest of thirteen children—eleven boys and two girls. Her father died when she was two. Her mother, Ada Redmon, cleaned houses and taught Elsie to bake with her own little utensils. Other than a cooking class at the Red Cross and French language lessons (the better to understand classic cuisine) at the downtown YWCA, Elsie has had no formal culinary training.

Elsie grew up on Pittsburgh's Mount Washington, which overlooks downtown's Golden Triangle, where the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers meet to form the Ohio. "From our back bedroom, we could see downtown," Elsie remembers. Her large family lived in one three-room apartment plus a second apartment with four rooms. Sandwiched in the apartment between the Redmons was a woman who was so bent over that she paid Elsie a dollar a week, a princely sum in the 1920s, to scrub her bathroom floor. Perhaps it was that job that inspired Elsie to later spurn housekeeping as a career.

She inherited most of her childhood clothes from a wealthy family. "Their daughter would wear a dress two or three times, and then it was mine," she recalls. "I guess that's where I got my obsession with fashionable clothes." To shop for something special, she and her mother would hike down a road that ended at a streetcar tunnel not far from the Monongahela Incline, which carried paying customers up and down the steep Mount Washington. Then they walked across the bridge. Elsie recalls shopping at a favorite place, Lewin-Neiman Department Store, for a new dress when she was six or seven. It was the first time

she remembers being racially stereotyped. The white saleswoman showed Elsie and her mother dress after dress, but she didn't see one that she liked. Eventually, her mother spotted one that appealed.

"Why didn't you show us that one?" her mother asked.

"I don't think you can afford it," the clerk said.

Her mother replied: "I've got eleven boys who work, and I can afford any dress in this place!"

By the time we met, Elsie was often the best-dressed woman in the room and, as she put it, "the poor woman's Imelda Marcos" of shoe lovers. Only imported Italian shoes will do for Elsie. Her sense of style starts with her appearance and encompasses her apartment and the food she creates.

When she was growing up, rich people on Mount Washington went to Elsie's mother when they had things that needed doing. The energetic Mrs. Redmon had taught herself to read and write and could do almost anything for her brood. But she told her boys, who had more formal education, that they'd have to be the ones to teach their eager little sister. At the age of five, Elsie had a library card. A year later, she walked, alone, a mile and a half from her hillside home to the Carnegie Library on Mount Washington's Grandview Avenue, which overlooks the city. "I didn't play with other children," she recalls. "The kids in the neighborhood had not a book in the house."

Elsie's elocution and handwriting have always been excellent. "When I skipped second grade, the teacher at Cargo Elementary School called in my mother to find out where exactly I learned to read," Elsie remembers. "From her brothers," her mother said.

"That girl always has a book," a worried neighbor told her mother.

"Pay no attention," Elsie's mother told her inquisitive daughter. "There's only one person like you and that's you."

Elsie comes from a line of strong females but grew up in a time when black women had few options in education or careers. She had planned to be a Licensed Practical Nurse until she discovered she was more comfortable with her hands in brioche than bandages. Her mother was born in the South, and some of the family recipes reflect this regional food, with its cornbread stuffing and sweet potato pie.

Elsie was a good student, but she was in a hurry to make money and so quit Pittsburgh's Schenley High School before she was graduated. Her first brush with the Kaufmann's Department Store family came when she was seventeen



Elsie Henderson in her Pittsburgh apartment with a 1964 Mary Shaw Mahrohnic charcoal portrait of herself. Photograph by Linda Mitzel.

years old. She was working at Kaufmann's Service Center when she saw her future boss, though at the time she didn't know who Edgar J. Kaufmann was.

For a young woman just out of high school, working in the store's bad accounts department had its share of guilty pleasures. "I always used to find the names of a number of people I knew who were delinquent paying their bills," she recalls. One of them was the boss's brother, Oliver Kaufmann. When he came by, Elsie teased him about not paying his bill. "I'll need a raise before I can afford to do that," he joked right back.

Her cooking career came next—working for families in the Borough of Sewickley Heights, an affluent neighborhood north of Pittsburgh. That experience led her to a white woman Elsie knew only as “Miss Gouzie,” who linked wealthy Pittsburghers with servants. The woman introduced Elsie to H. J. “Jack” Heinz II, who was looking for a cook for Rosemont Farms, the Heinz estate in Fox Chapel, a wealthy borough north of Pittsburgh. She got the job, even though (or maybe because) she usually spoke her mind with her employers. “I was raised with eleven boys, and I got gumption,” she said, quickly adding that she always knew how far to go when talking to rich people. Later, she recalled: “Jack Heinz was right about one thing,” she said. “He told me, ‘Never pay attention to a recipe.’” Elsie seldom met a recipe she didn’t change.

Through the years, she kept in touch with U.S. Senator John Heinz, son of Jack Heinz. She called him “Johnny” and remembered him as a mischievous, happy little boy playing with his dog. On one visit to Pittsburgh, he picked her out of a crowd and insisted on introducing her to Richard Thornburgh, the Republican governor of Pennsylvania (1978–1986). The governor, she said wryly, “certainly didn’t want to meet *me*.”

Twice married, with the corresponding name changes, Elsie is tight-lipped about those ups and downs in her life.

She enjoys talking, however, about her ongoing aspirations to culinary excellence. She uses the phrase *Cuisine au Courant* to describe her expertise after a lifetime of learning about trends in food and entertaining (and to grace her return address labels). Elsie avidly reads food magazines, such as *Bon Appetit*, and when I wrote and edited the food sections of the *Pittsburgh Press* and later the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Elsie always had questions and comments.

When she looked at cookbooks, such as the classic *Joy of Cooking* or *Flavor of France*, written by mother-daughter team Narcisse and Narcissa Chamberlain, she used them as inspiration, then struck out on her own to add, subtract, and revise—with one exception. “I tried to remain true to my mother’s recipes,” she says.

Most modern conveniences are anathema to Elsie. She treasures her Mixmaster and her dishwasher but has never used a food processor or a microwave—“I don’t want anything in my kitchen I don’t understand,” she says. She has neither a cable for her television nor an answering machine for her telephone. Computer? Ha!

If Elsie listed every Pittsburgh notable she has cooked for in forty-plus

years, it would read like a Who's Who of the city. The list of out-of-towners even includes the cookbook-writing Chamberlains.

About the only time Elsie ventured farther east than New York was for a summer in Hyannisport, Massachusetts. In 1965, Elsie worked for Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister of Senator Edward Kennedy and the late president John F. Kennedy, while Mrs. Shriver's French chef was on vacation. During her summer there, Elsie recalls, ten-year-old Maria Shriver was on a diet—she was limited to three lamb chops—and Caroline and John Kennedy Jr. were “some of the best-behaved children I've ever seen.” One summer day, when Senator Kennedy ventured out to the kitchen to ask what was for dinner, Elsie showed him some beef she had ground up from the roast she'd served the night before. Eunice, thinking frugally, had told Elsie to use up the meat. “I don't eat anything that's been ground up,” Elsie remembers Ted Kennedy saying. Although he never ate any of her food, when Senator Kennedy visited Pittsburgh in 1983, he noticed Elsie in the crowd and, calling her by name, asked when she was coming back to Hyannis.

Despite the famous people she met over the years, Elsie's inspiration remains her mother, who looms largest in her memories. Her mother gave birth to all her children at home. “She was only in the hospital once in her life. She went in for cataract surgery and died there.” Mrs. Redmon had an undiagnosed heart problem.

Edgar Kaufmann Sr., who knew Mrs. Redmon through Elsie, occasionally went missing from his downtown office in Kaufmann's. Eluding even his bodyguard, he would turn up at Elsie's mother's apartment in Terrace Village, a public housing development. He'd sit at Mrs. Redmon's kitchen table for hours, exchanging stories and enjoying her company. And her food. “He knew Mother's baking days,” Elsie says with a grin.

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To find Edgar Sr. sitting in Pittsburgh across the table from Elsie's mother, you have to trace his family history back across the years and miles to Germany. In 1869, Isaac Kaufmann joined his brother Jacob, who had immigrated to Pennsylvania from Hesse-Darmstadt. The brothers peddled clothes through the farms, villages, and coalfields in the Youghiogheny River Valley (interestingly, *Kaufmann* is German for merchant). Their sixty-mile route along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad included Bear Run.

Isaac and Jacob Kaufmann opened a clothing store on Pittsburgh's South

Side in 1871, which they moved to a larger space nearby one year later. Their brothers Henry and Morris soon joined the enterprise, and the Kaufmanns added a second store on what is now Pittsburgh's North Side. In 1878, the brothers closed those two locations in favor of one large store in downtown Pittsburgh, at Fifth Avenue and Smithfield Street, where Kaufmann's Department Store, now a Macy's, still stands.

Edgar Jonas Kaufmann was born in 1885 to Morris and his wife Betty, and Lillian Sarah Kaufmann (she later changed the spelling of her first name to Liliane), his future wife, was the daughter of Isaac, which made them first cousins. They married in 1909 in New York, because first cousins were not allowed to wed in Pennsylvania. Their son, Edgar J. Kaufmann jr., was born in Pittsburgh in 1910. He attended prep school at Pittsburgh's Shady Side Academy, though he left one credit shy of graduation. He studied painting in Europe, including Vienna, Florence, and London, and became a noted art collector, historian, and teacher.

Edgar Sr. bought Henry Kaufmann's share of Kaufmann's Department Store in 1913, and then he bought Isaac's. His uncle Jacob had died in 1905. Under Edgar and Liliane's leadership, business boomed, and Kaufmann's was named the most beautiful department store in America.

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The Kaufmann and Redmon families came together when Elsie began cooking weekend meals—preparing breakfast, lunch, and side dishes for dinner—at Fallingwater in 1947. Elsie had answered a newspaper advertisement for a job she remembers thinking was “too good to be true.” She interviewed for the job in the Kaufmann's penthouse apartment, and accepted the offer, even though she was unsure about the job at first because it entailed traveling so far from the city each weekend. It did not take long for Elsie to fall in love with the work and the home beside the waterfall.

Fallingwater is a house in the trees, its music provided by a rushing mountain stream called Bear Run. It's not true that Frank Lloyd Wright dismissed this kitchen as simply “work space,” as he had labeled some other kitchens in houses he designed. Yet by modern-day standards, the 15-by-12-foot room was nothing special: a Frigidaire when that name was synonymous with refrigerator, a Formica-topped kitchen table and four chairs, a bank of yellow metal St. Charles cupboards (the best at the time) and a stainless steel double sink. But a kitchen with a view like this is every cook's dream.

On her very first day, Elsie got an eyeful. It was 1947. She was thirty-three



The Kaufmanns: Edgar Sr., Liliane, and Edgar jr. on the Fallingwater terrace. Photograph courtesy of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

years old. That day, she heard laughter and looked outside to see the Kaufmanns and their guests as they splashed and frolicked in the chilly waters. Nude.

“I was standing there at the stove, and there were ten or twelve people—all buck naked—under the falls. It was a mixed crowd, and some of them were on their backs. I thought, ‘It’s a nudist camp!’

“What have I gotten myself into?” she wondered.

What she had gotten into turned out to be the highlight of her culinary career. She was there to cook for the rich and famous of Western Pennsylvania and beyond—from violinist Isaac Stern to Mexican artists Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera—and she couldn’t beat the view.

Elsie’s preparation for Fallingwater weekends began on Thursdays when she checked with the Kaufmanns’ weekday cook at their apartment in downtown Pittsburgh. She wanted to make sure she wouldn’t cook the same foods for the weekend that the city cook had prepared during the week. Every Friday, the Kaufmanns’ chauffeur, Harold Jones, picked up Elsie in Pittsburgh to drive her to Fallingwater, as she had never learned to drive a car. Early in her career, she sometimes took the streetcar or the bus to jobs, but most often she lived with her employers. At Fallingwater, she had her own room in the servants’ quarters, upstairs in the guesthouse, and she started each day early. Sometimes the Kaufmanns traveled abroad or stayed at their designer home in Palm Springs, California. Elsie was paid whether she was called to Fallingwater or not.

Elsie, who has cooked for many wealthy families, classifies employers as those “who could keep help and those who couldn’t.” The Kaufmanns could. “Who could have guessed that I could ever call a place like Fallingwater home?” she says. “It was the best job I ever had.”





Caraway Twists, Cinnamon Rolls, and Corn Sticks atop the Aga stove. Photograph by Linda Mitzel.

## THE LUNCH RECIPES

*Lunch at Fallingwater was served precisely at one o'clock. It was presented in the French style, with soup first, then the main course, followed by salad. The dessert was served at the table, too. Depending on the menu, the plates for each course were either chilled or heated.*

*Liliane didn't make a big deal out of it, but when the butler was serving, she surreptitiously tested the platter with her forefinger to make sure it was hot.*



Frank Lloyd Wright enjoyed Elsie's Crab Salad when he ate lunch at Fallingwater in 1956. Photograph by Linda Mitzel.

## SALADS, SOUPS, AND ONE-POT MAIN DISHES

### THE WRIGHT CRAB SALAD

*In the fifteen years Elsie Henderson cooked at Fallingwater, she prepared only one meal for architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who died in 1959 at age 92.*

*Edgar Kaufmann jr., who had inherited Fallingwater from his parents, asked the architect to come from Taliesin West in Arizona to set the house right after it flooded in 1956.*

*Elsie and the chauffeur picked up the architect at the Pittsburgh airport. Although they might have saved time by taking Interstate 376 in downtown Pittsburgh, Wright asked to be driven through the city's Oakland-Shadyside area, where four colleges are clustered. He especially wanted to see the University of Pittsburgh's forty-two-story Cathedral of Learning on Fifth Avenue.*

*"It's the tallest Keep Off the Grass sign I've ever seen," Wright said, as they drove past the monumental structure. "They had to build it up," Elsie tried to tell the architect. "There wasn't enough land to do anything else." A pen-and-ink drawing of Elsie from that time pictures her as a woman of beauty. Her appearance prompted Frank Lloyd Wright to say, "If you cook as well as you look, everything is all right."*

*After Frank Lloyd Wright talked to the workmen about flood repairs, he ate a simple repast of Crab Salad and Corn Sticks with lemon sherbet for dessert. He sat alone at the black walnut veneer table he had designed for Fallingwater's dining area.*

Rinse the crabmeat well and remove any shell fragments. Pat the crab with paper towels to remove excess moisture. Mix the crab gently with the celery and peppers, taking care not to break it into shreds. Moisten the mixture with salad dressing. Do not overdress.

Serve on Bibb lettuce leaves.

#### **Serves 4**

**Note:** It is important to buy lump crabmeat, although the back fin crab may be less expensive. The Kaufmanns' crabmeat usually came from the Chesapeake Bay.

2 pounds lump crabmeat,  
picked over

½ cup heart of celery, finely  
chopped

½ medium red pepper, finely  
chopped (about ¼ cup)

½ medium green pepper, finely  
chopped (about ¼ cup)

Boiled Salad Dressing (recipe on  
page 00)

Bibb lettuce leaves, washed and  
patted dry

### THICK CREAM SAUCE

4 tablespoons butter  
4 tablespoons all-purpose flour  
1¾ cups whole milk  
Dash salt and pepper  
Pinch of nutmeg

### SOUFFLÉ

6 eggs, separated (reserve 1 yolk for another use)  
¾ cup grated cheese (a combination of Swiss cheese and Parmesan)

## CHEESE SOUFFLÉ

*Cheese soufflé was Edgar Sr.'s top-of-the-list luncheon favorite. For guests, tomato sauce was served over the soufflé, or sometimes mushroom sauce. Edgar Sr. preferred strawberry preserves. Cook Elsie Henderson was proud of this dish. "There was almost as much soufflé above the pan as in it."*

**CREAM SAUCE:** In a saucepan on low heat, combine the butter and flour. Add the milk. Simmer the sauce, stirring constantly, until it thickens. Sauce will be very thick. Add the salt, pepper, and nutmeg; stir the cheese into the hot sauce. Remove the pan from the heat, let cool, and add 5 beaten egg yolks, stirring constantly.

**SOUFFLÉ:** In a glass bowl or the metal bowl of an electric mixer, beat the 6 egg whites until stiff but not dry. Stiff peaks will form.

Carefully fold ⅓ of the beaten whites into the cooled cream sauce. When well distributed, very lightly fold in the rest of the egg white mixture.

Make an aluminum foil collar for a 2- to 2½-quart soufflé dish. Pour the mixture into a soufflé dish, or straight-sided casserole. Place the dish in a hot water bath (see note) and bake in a 375-degree F oven for about 45 minutes, or until high and browned. Serve immediately.

**Note:** Here's how to prepare a hot water bath, also called a Bain-Marie. Once the soufflé mixture has been poured into the soufflé dish, place it in a large pan that has been filled with boiling—or very hot—water. This method assures uniform baking of the delicate soufflé.

**Serves 3 to 6**

## H. J. HEINZ CORN CHOWDER

When Fallingwater was built, commercially canned soups were readily available—for a dime. That didn't mean that the wealthy families of Pittsburgh fired their cooks and opened a can. Elsie Henderson quickly learned that when she applied for a job as cook for H. J. "Jack" Heinz II.

*"Do you know how to make good homemade soup?" she was asked.*

*"Of course," she replied, "but the H. J. Heinz Co. makes all kinds of soups."*

*"Yes, but those are for the public, not for the family."*

Later, when Elsie was cooking for the Kaufmanns, Jack Heinz was invited to lunch. Edgar Sr. asked her to make something his guest was especially fond of. She made corn chowder. Homemade, of course.

At the table, Heinz tasted the soup and nodded his approval to his host. "My cook used to make a soup like this," he said. Edgar clapped his hands, and his cook emerged from the kitchen.

*"Elsie, it's you!" Heinz said. They all had a good laugh over that.*

Fry the bacon in a sauté pan until it is very crisp and dry. Pour the drippings from the pan, reserving ½ tablespoon or more. Chop the bacon into small pieces.

To the drippings, add the celery and onion, and cook until tender. Blend in the flour and then the milk, stirring constantly until smooth.

In a saucepan, cook the potatoes in water to cover until they are tender. Drain.

To the liquid, add the creamed corn and the potatoes. Stir in the bacon.

Sprinkle with fresh chopped parsley and paprika.

**Serves 4**

**Note:** Liliane Kaufmann was particular about her corn, and this recipe is made her way. She insisted that after the ears were husked and washed and the corn silk was removed, only the tips of each kernel be cut from the cob with a sharp knife. The rest of the kernels left on the cob were discarded. Elsie placed the tender kernels in the oven on low heat to draw out the natural "cream" from the corn.

½ pound bacon

½ to 1 tablespoon bacon drippings

½ cup finely chopped celery

1 small onion, finely chopped

2 tablespoons flour

4 cups whole milk

2 cups cooked potatoes, peeled and well chopped

2 cups creamed corn (see note)

Fresh chopped parsley and paprika, for garnish

## LAUREL HIGHLANDS GAZPACHO

*Today, we would call the key ingredient in this Gazpacho “heirloom” tomatoes. The freshness of the cold soup, which was made from vegetables grown within miles of Fallingwater, made it Edgar jr.’s favorite lunch when he came in from New York for the weekend. He never learned to drive and he would travel by train from his Manhattan apartment, often with friends, and be met in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. The chauffeur would drive the party to Fallingwater.*

3 cups tomato juice  
2 beef bouillon cubes  
2 fresh tomatoes, peeled, seeded,  
and chopped  
½ teaspoon Tabasco sauce  
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce  
1 teaspoon salt  
2 tablespoons pure olive oil (not  
extra virgin)  
4 tablespoons red wine vinegar  
¼ cup finely chopped onion  
¼ cup chopped green pepper  
½ cup chopped cucumber  
(do not pare)  
Croutons, for garnish (directions  
follow)

The night before the Gazpacho is to be served, heat the tomato juice in a large soup pot. Add the bouillon cubes and heat until dissolved. Add all the remaining ingredients, except the croutons. Bring to a simmer. Remove from the heat.

Cool the Gazpacho to room temperature and chill overnight. At the same time, chill the soup bowls.

Serve the soup cold and topped with crisp croutons. To make the croutons: cut day-old homestyle or Italian bread into bite-size squares. In a frying pan, sauté the cubes lightly in butter, a few at a time, until lightly browned on all sides. Remove from the pan. Cool on paper towels. Store in an airtight container.

**Serves 6 to 8**

**Note:** To easily peel the tomatoes, drop them, one by one, into boiling water for 10 to 20 seconds. Remove with metal tongs. The skins will slip right off.

Seasonal cucumbers and peppers for Laurel  
Highlands Gazpacho. Photograph by Linda Mitzel.

