

OBITUARIES



# Jeannine Mermet, groundbreaking restaurateur and chanteuse, has died at 93

Jeannine Mermet brought a splash and dash of Parisian style to staid Philadelphia with La Truffe and Janine et Jeannine.



Jeannine Mermet with chef Georges Perrier at his restaurant, Le Bec-Fin, in about 2012.

FILE PHOTOGRAPH

by Michael Klein  
Published May 29, 2022

Jeannine Mermet, 93, who brought a splash and dash of Parisian style to staid Philadelphia in the mid-1960s with groundbreaking French restaurants including Janine et Jeannine and La Truffe, died May 17 at Parkview, a nursing home in Wilmington. She lived in West Philadelphia for many years, followed by Lower Merion.

“She loved being fit and staying in shape,” her daughter Sherry Witman said. Ms. Mermet swam several times a week at Witman’s water-aerobics class at the Ardmore YMCA, later in Haverford. Ms Mermet moved to Delaware several years ago to be closer to daughter Patricia Lavin.

<https://www.inquirer.com/obituaries/jeannine-mermet-french-restaurant-obituary-20220529.html>

Ms. Mermet told The Inquirer two decades ago that no one in Philadelphia knew what a quiche was in 1966 when she and a partner opened Janine et Jeannine.

The only child of a chauffeur, Ms. Mermet was a Montmartre schoolgirl when the German army overran France in 1940. She and her classmates were evacuated to the south. After four months, she returned to Paris, where she lived under Nazi rule until the city was liberated in 1944.



Jeannine Mermet (left) and Janine Etienne outside Janine et Jeannine, their bistro, which opened in 1966 at 10 S. Front St.  
COURTESY MERMET FAMILY

For a [memoir produced in 2018](#) by filmmakers Vicky Funari and Hilary Brashear, Ms. Mermet recounted how in late 1945, barely 17 years old, she met Franklin Lazos, an American soldier, in the Paris metro. They were married three months later and moved first to his hometown of Schuylkill Haven in Schuylkill County, Pa., and then to Philadelphia with their two daughters. She quickly learned English and took singing lessons.



Lazos happened upon a Center City nightclub whose chorus line opened the show. One night, the choreographer asked Ms. Mermet — who used her birth name professionally — whether she had ever danced. That turned into a career that slowed down shortly before the birth of the couple's son, Keith, and resumed until the early 1960s. In the 1950s, Ms. Mermet and her husband divorced. Keith Lazos died in 2015 at age 62.

"I used to watch her [rehearse] on the chorus line," said Patricia Lavin, who said her mother had "a heart of gold. If anyone was alone on Christmas, she'd welcome them to our home."

In the early 1960s, she told her biographers, she noticed that Philadelphia was changing.

"Some of the clubs were closing," she said. "It wasn't 'in' anymore. They were looking toward food, talking about food. Everybody wanted to open a restaurant. Except for me." That is, until she met Janine Etienne, also a Frenchwoman, who suggested that they go into the restaurant business together.

In January 1966, during a snowstorm, they opened Janine et Jeannine at 408 S. Second St., across from Head House Square and now the Mexican restaurant Xochitl.



Jeannine Mermet and U.S. Rep. Thomas Foglietta riding up an escalator at 30th Street Station in Philadelphia after a trip from Washington, D.C., on Sept. 5, 1997. That day, he was nominated to become the U.S. ambassador to Italy.

FILE PHOTOGRAPH

“We worked all day,” Ms. Mermet wrote. “We did all the cooking, all the shopping. I would get up at 5 in the morning to go shopping for the restaurant in South Philadelphia. And then we worked all day and all night. But at night before we opened, we’d always wear an evening gown. So we were very quickly known as Janine et Jeannine, the two French women that are so elegant all the time at their restaurant. They didn’t realize how hard we’d work, you know?”

When their landlord demanded a share of the profits to renew the lease, in 1970 they found an old coffee-import house at 10 S. Front St.

They moved Janine et Jeannine, later redoing it as La Truffe, a far-more-polished restaurant serving nouvelle cuisine.

La Truffe, a perennial best-of-Philadelphia contender, was popular among the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs gourmet set. It had a disco called La Bohème on the second floor. Lavin was the lunch chef and cake baker for several years.

In 1988, noted chefs including Georges Perrier and Jean-Marie Lacroix re-created Babette’s Feast, after the movie, with a menu studded with dishes such as turtle soup and quail wrapped in pastry. Ms. Mermet stepped back into the spotlight, singing on weekends with a combo, until La Truffe’s closing in 1996.

She also operated Tout Suite and Windows on the Water in Philadelphia. Her finale was the short-lived Sienna, in Wilmington, which opened in 1998.

For two decades, she was the companion of Tom Foglietta, the longtime member of Philadelphia City Council, congressman, and U.S. ambassador to Italy, until his death in 2004.

In addition to her daughters, Ms. Mermet is survived by four grandchildren, 11 great-grandchildren, and four great-great grandchildren.

Visitation will be 10 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. Tuesday, May 31, with a service to follow at noon at the D’Anjolell Barone Memorial Home of Wallingford, 908 S. Providence Rd, Wallingford, Pa. 19086. Burial will be private.

Published May 29, 2022



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I cover the food and restaurant scene, including businesses and the people.

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