

CLAUDE FORELL – 2003

By Peter Cole-Adams

Never, in the long history of Australian journalism, has one man eaten so much posh nosh over so many years at his employer's expense, while being paid to complain about it, as Claude Forell.

But there is much more to Claude than the substantial sum of the good grub he has consumed as a food critic in relentless pursuit of gastronomic truth. He is one of Victoria's most durable and distinguished journalists.

He has been, variously, a fine reporter, a foreign correspondent of insight, a shrewd, provocative columnist and one of the best editorial-writers in the business.

He is the author of a textbook on Australian politics – entitled *How We Are Governed*, first published in 1964 and regularly updated – that informed generations of Victorian schoolchildren.

He has also given much honorary service to journalism – both as a former president of the Melbourne Press Club and as a leading light in The Age Independence Committee.

Claude spent most of his journalistic career – spanning more than 50 years -- with one newspaper, *The Age*.

Claude Rainer Forell was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in January 1931. About eight and a half years later, in 1939, he arrived in Australia.

He was educated at Camperdown High School before going on to Melbourne University, where he acquired a BA and a Diploma of Journalism. He was editor of the University newspaper, *Farago*, and part-time university correspondent, first for the *Sun News Pictorial* and then *The Age*. He also, improbably, gained experience as a casual fruit picker, as a salesman, and as a tram conductor.

After these youthful brushes with the real world, Claude joined *The Age* as a cadet in December 1952 and was soon promoted to shipping reporter. Then, in 1955, he became Western Roundsman. (Some suspect he was the last *Age* reporter to set foot in Broadmeadows.) Then, after a brief stint sub-editing, he was sent as a deputy

political correspondent to Canberra before being brought back to Melbourne in 1961 as State political reporter -- a job he carried out with distinction.

In 1964, he was appointed a leader-writer, seen in those days by editors of *The Age* as a pre-condition for an overseas posting. He was duly appointed London correspondent in 1966 and remained there until 1970, covering British politics and the Paris riots of 1968. He was tear-gassed for his trouble.

Back in Melbourne, he returned to leader-writing and started a weekly political column which ran for more than two decades.

Claude's column was idiosyncratic. His denunciations of the Country, later the National, Party -- which he regarded as an untidy blot on the democratic landscape -- were forensic and furious.

The Forell wisdom was never the conventional wisdom. Often he used the column to put an opposing case to the argument he had persuasively and anonymously made, on the previous day, in an *Age* editorial. It was Claude's view (and mine, for that matter) that a leader-writer's task is sometimes like a barrister's -- to do the best job you can with a lousy brief. By contrast, a columnist's task is to say his or her own thing. No one has balanced the two roles more adroitly.

It is a measure of Claude's versatility and stamina that even while he was walking this intellectual tightrope, he also became a restaurant critic, savaging unworthy sauces, flattening overblown soufflés, but remembering that the best reviewers are constructive. He was a founding co-editor of *The Age Good Food Guide*.

History recalls Claude's celebrated 1988 exchange with Stephen Downes, a rival food critic and former *Age* colleague. Downes unkindly described *The Age* guide as the "Turin Shroud of Gastronomy". Claude's riposte was to dismiss Downes as "the Reverend Ian Paisley of Gastronomy". He was not a man to be trifled with.

Melbourne's food lovers, and successive editors of *The Age*, owe him debts of gratitude.