

# The Face Of Taste



Peter Coe

## PETER COE REMEMBERED AS SEASONING THE REGION WITH EPICUREAN DELIGHTS | BY PATRICK EVANS-HYLTON

Last June, after a brief battle with cancer, Peter Coe passed away at age 70, leaving a legacy of being one of Hampton Roads' great tastemakers. Coe embraced the region almost four decades ago, having moved here from the Northeast. He found the area dappled with more fry basket eateries than fine dining restaurants and more places to buy processed cheddar than premium camembert. Unfazed, he decided to do something about it and shed his financial career for one of a gourmet grocer. He founded Taste Unlimited with a single store in the Hilltop area of Virginia Beach in 1973. Today there are six locations across the region; in 2006 Coe sold his interest to father/son Peter and Jon Pruden but remained involved as the face of Taste.

For five years, and right up to his death, Coe's tall frame; wide, contagious smile; and booming, almost sing-songy voice was still a fixture in the stores. He poured wine for customers and passed on tips in his cooking classes. He offered advice on everything from soup to nuts. He loved Hampton Roads, and Hampton Roads loved him. And Hampton Roads owes him gratitude for not eliminating our taste for beer, but showing us it's ok to have a taste for champagne, too. He imported fine goods but was an endless champion of local purveyors as well; Coe was an early advocate of Virginia wine, selling it since 1978 when he first brought Meredyth's Marechal Foch into the stores. Coe's was a big table—one of both simple pleasures and refined taste. He touched many in his life, and we spoke with a handful of folks who shared personal stories.

Peter Coe was a kind person and a loyal friend. A gentle giant. One of a kind. At the same time, he was a free spirit and a wonderfully creative entrepreneur in the Virginia specialty food business and beyond.

I first met Peter when he burst through the front door of my store, Rowena's Jam and Jelly Factory, shortly after my opening in 1983. He surveyed the retail store, tasted a few things, toured the kitchen, bakery and warehouse and abruptly announced triumphantly with his broad grin, "I'll take a case of every one of your products."

How like him throughout his life—impulsive, intuitively knowing what he liked and what would enchant his customers ... I could have kissed him. This was my first big order, and it was going to the ever-popular Peter Coe creation Taste Unlimited and its chain of *avant garde* gourmet stores. Enthusiasm radiated from Peter Coe, energizing everyone within earshot, and his inquisitiveness helped everyone in the industry to create and thereby excel.

We became fast friends through the years sharing our visions of the Virginia small specialty foods industry as it became a national leader, preeminent in the National Association of Specialty Foods Trade. He was truly a leader. Peter was special and I will miss him. He will be and is sorely missed. It is an honor to call Peter Coe friend.

—Rowena Fullinwider, founder of Rowena's, [www.rowenas.com](http://www.rowenas.com)

Our family purchased Taste from Peter and his family in October 2006. Little did we know then, that was just the beginning of both a great working partnership and friendship.

As Peter often remarked, Taste was to be his legacy, and he continued to work with us each day for those five years to ensure the business continued to thrive. The sale of the company also allowed Peter to focus on the "fun" parts of the business that he enjoyed so much—wine and cheese buying, his cooking school and wine tastings. Because of this and the fact that he continued to nurture strong relationships with friends and family, I suspect Peter's last few years may have been the best of his life.

He was also a great mentor to me. I fondly remember one evening in New York City; a group from Taste was in town to attend the Fancy Food Show, and we were dining (and sweating) alfresco at a trattoria in the Village on a hotter than hell July evening. The red wine was served at room temperature, which seemed close to a slow boil.

Peter immediately seized a spoon, plunged it into each of our water glasses and dropped ice into everyone's wine glass. The look of shock on my face must have been obvious as Peter responded simply, with that famous wide grin and booming voice, "it's okkkaaaay, Jon!" It was a seminal moment where Peter imparted the lesson that great food and wine does not have to be pretentious.

—Jon Pruden, president, Taste Unlimited [www.tasteunlimited.com](http://www.tasteunlimited.com)



PHOTOS BY DAVID UHRIN

Peter Coe was the very first retailer of my products. I started Blue Crab Bay Co. on the kitchen table of my farmhouse near Onancock in the summer of 1985. That winter, I mailed small brochures promoting my dip blends and fishnet-wrapped gift packs to personal addresses I found in telephone books. Just after the holidays, I got a call from Peter, asking about my crab and clam dip blends.

He wanted to know if I would be offering them wholesale to specialty retailers. At that point, I had not thought that far along. I had no idea how to sell anything wholesale. So I told him "Sure!" and gave him a price so low that I lost money. He placed an order for the Taste Unlimited stores—I still have a copy of that order from January 1986. Later, I mailed him a copy of the letter and thanked him for believing in me.

Peter always stopped by our booth at the Fancy Food Show in New York or California to see if we had anything new and to make sure we were doing OK. I recall going to the Shore Drive location to do a demo of our Seafood Marinade & Grilling Sauce, and I was going to offer tastings of it with small spoons.

When Peter saw that, he said, "Oh no, I have a much better idea," and he disappeared for awhile. When he returned he had a large container of fresh tuna chunks and an electric skillet. He helped me marinate the tuna, and we cooked it and offered bites to his grateful customers.

He was such a gentleman and a kind-hearted soul.

—Pamela Barefoot, founder and president of Blue Crab Bay Co., [www.bluecrabbay.com](http://www.bluecrabbay.com)

We all have significant moments in our life. One of mine was getting the job of buyer/merchandise manager at Taste Unlimited.

In 2002 the Taste Unlimited logo (the old one, with grapes, wine and a wedge of cheese) caught my eye in the want ads, and I sent a letter in response. Peter called me in, and we chatted about our love of food and *Gourmet* magazine. He said he could tell I was a foodie.

Amazingly, he gave me the job. My previous work experience was 16 years in dental offices; I had no retail or merchandising experience whatsoever. He trusted me from the get go, and for nine years I had free rein to buy what I wanted for the stores and design the gifts for the Christmas catalogue.

I'll never forget the first time I attended the Fancy Food Show in New York with Peter. Walking with him was like walking with a rock star. Forget that he was beautifully dressed and a Steve Martin look-a-like, he knew everyone that mattered in the world of specialty food and they knew him. It was slow going, as he had to talk to so many old friends and colleagues.

When I was working in the stores a guest would often ask me a question about wine. If Peter happened to be there, I would grab him and steer him to the guest. It was understood that customer service was top priority, and no one enforced that more than Peter Coe. He would introduce himself and turn on the charm, which wasn't an act. Moments later the dazzled guest would be at the register clutching a bottle of wine, usually with a dazed smile.

They had interacted with a rock star, and I'll bet many of them remember that moment well.

—Connie Weis, owner, Brownies, Cookies & S'more



AS SEEN

IN THE

JANUARY 2012

ISSUE OF

