

AT HOME WITH

Rex Stout

By RITA DELFINER

"IT'S AN AWFUL WASTE of space to use a whole room in a house for nothing but eating in," remarked Rex Stout, who had been sorting his mail after lunch and found a letter addressed to Nero Wolfe.

"I get a lot of silly mail like that," he said. The 86-year-old author was sitting in a bentwood rocker in the center of a broad extension to the living room of the house he had designed and built into a hillside on the New York-Connecticut border at Brewster, N. Y. That roomy passageway also serves as an informal dining area.

"There is no connection between Nero Wolfe and me as a person," said Stout about his fictional detective who, across half a hundred novels since 1934 has become real to millions of readers, along with his dining room and the orchids he tends in the plant rooms of his imaginary W. 35th St. brownstone.

Stout doesn't grow orchids. "I couldn't grow orchids without a greenhouse," he said. "If I had a greenhouse I'd want to spend half my time there and couldn't do a lot of other things I want to do. I want to play chess. I want to read. I want to argue."

Argue about what? "Oh, almost anything," he said. "I prefer to argue about things I don't know much about, because then you have more freedom in what you say."

But he speaks from experience on many subjects. Five hours each day are spent working in the gardens, which include 184 varieties of tall bearded iris and 103 varieties of day lilies. The thin aluminum

discs swaying in the wind, attached to a nylon cord around the corn in the vegetable garden, are a Stout creation — to intimidate squirrels.

"I haven't had an ear of corn disturbed all year," he reported.

When he started building the 14-room two-story concrete house in 1930, for once he avoided arguments by steering clear of professional builders. "I knew they'd all have their own ideas I

Avocado Todhunter

4 ripe avocados
2 cups watercress leaves
1 teaspoon each: lemon juice, orange juice, lime juice, grapefruit juice, pineapple juice.
1 teaspoon shredded ice

Halve the avocados and remove the seeds; do not peel them. Pinch or cut off the watercress leaves singly, keeping no stems, and distribute them into the avocados, which should be fairly well filled. After straining the fruit juices through a double layer of cheesecloth, put them into a small atomizer with the shredded ice and shake until the ice is melted. Spray the watercress leaves thoroughly just before the avocados are to be eaten. Serve on nests of nasturtium leaves.

Serves 8.

couldn't change," he said. He built it alone? "Oh my God, no, my dear child," protested Stout. He had had eight men to help him, including Harold Salmon, who lives at the foot of the hill and since then has worked for Stout, doing most of the gardening on the 18-acre site.

"One day in 1931," said Stout, "Lewis Gannett [the literary critic] stopped here, as he often did on his way to New York. He had with him a Polish gal named Pola Hoffmann."

The Stout-Hoffmann nuptials took place the next year. It was his second marriage. The living room, with a view out over Connecticut's lush hillsides, is full of the wood furniture that Stout custom-built. There are many pictures of Mrs. Stout, a textile designer who, the day of the interview, was away visiting a neighbor, singer Marian Anderson.

"The largest party we ever had was 80 people, and I roasted two suckling pigs in an outdoor thing I built," said Stout, leading the way to the kitchen and pointing out the sink. "It was a hell of a job to fit that with formica," he said, "so it would be even."

Visitors these quieter days are people who live nearby, one of the couple's two married daughters, grandchildren, his two sisters, writer John Hersey ("when he's



Post Photo by Arthur Pomerantz

No orchids—but a lot of corn.

around") and other friends.

There are three cooks who take turns in the kitchen: Hortensia Noel, who lives with the Stouts, and Mrs. Stout ("a very fine cook"), and Stout himself. "I'll cook baked beans, I'll roast a pheasant when I can get one. I'll fairly frequently try some new stunt with eggs, I'll cook literally anything."

An inflexible note is heard in Rex Todhunter Stout's voice when he's asked if there were some easier way to prepare Avocado Todhunter, one of the many delicious sounding specialties gathered in the newly published "The Nero Wolfe Cookbook" (Viking), a compendium of recipes for the culinary masterpieces enjoyed by the fictional gourmet

who, incidentally, is served shad roe Creole in "Please Pass the Guilt" which will be coming out next month.

What should cooks do who don't have an atomizer—specified in the recipe as the sensible way to apply the dressing to the avocados which Nero Wolfe serves on nests of nasturtium leaves?

"Better buy one," said Stout.

At 86 he's sure some things do get easier. "In one way it's more fun to look at pretty girls than when you're in your 50s. Because when you're in your 80s, you can look at a pretty girl with appreciation without aspiration. Which I think is sort of neat and goddam true."

Stout later led the way

outside and up a slight incline to his quarter-acre vegetable garden.

First stop, an empty patch. "I don't use chives in the summer," he said, "I use shallots. Do you like them?" He detoured to the small concrete toolhouse, returned with a trowel which he casually tucked into his back pocket.

"Turn left," he said, leading the way past tall sunflowers ("I'm from Kansas and I like to look at them"), past lettuce, lettuce seed ("I grow my own just for fun"), asparagus, turnips, pumpkins.

"Look here, darlin'," he said, squatting down and scooping up bulb after bulb of shallots with the trowel, and offered them as a gift.

or
spick" = English! otherwise
Darlin', I do not speak
loongly de other!