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Dining

The Gifts She Gave

By JULIA MOSKIN

WHEN aspiring young food writers ask how I learned the trade — Was culinary school the first step? A journalism degree? Apprenticeship in a three-star kitchen in France? — I brace myself to disappoint them. I didn't do any of those (extremely practical and admirable) things.

"The thing is," I begin, "I was named after Julia Child."

Child was born 100 years ago Wednesday, and without her, the phrase "aspiring food writer" might never have been uttered in the United States. Being named for her was certainly a nudge in the direction of food, but I didn't grow up with a silver spoonful of chocolate mousse in my mouth. I simply watched my parents make dinner (sometimes beef bourguignon, more often burgers) and absorbed their notion that food was interesting and entertaining, not just fuel.

Jacques Pépin recalls a friend and sidekick, Page 6.

This didn't happen in many New York families in the 1970s. Parents who did cook served meals of "wheatloaf" and carob cake; those who didn't were busy raising their consciousnesses while the children ordered in Chinese food.

Today, the "family dinner" (preferably home cooked, from responsibly sourced ingredients) is widely considered a necessity, and even toddlers have favorite chefs.

It was Child — not single-handedly, but close — who started the public conversation about cooking in America that has shaped our cuisine and culture ever since. Her "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" was published in 1961, just as trends including feminism, food technology and fast food seemed ready to wipe out home cooking. But with her energy, intelligence and nearly deranged enthusiasm, Child turned that tide.

Today, in an age of round-the-clock food television and three-

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A Centennial Look at the Gifts Julia Child Gave

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ingredient recipes, her book strikes many cooks the way it does the writer Lisa Birnbach, who told me: "Here's the thing about Julia Child and me. While she has been a figure in my life for a long time, I have never actually used her cookbook."

Indeed, it can be daunting. Not only are many recipes long and detailed, but they often call for ingredients that are no longer easy to find, like ground thyme and frying chickens, and equipment like ramekins and asbestos mats. Her insistence that tomatoes be peeled, chickens trussed and eggs beaten with a fork, not a whisk (all elements of the professional training she imbibed) now seems needlessly persnickety.

But in its fundamental qualities, the book and its many successors in the Child canon aren't dated at all. Their recipes remain perfectly written and rock-solid reliable. And many home cooks, including me, have a Julia Child recipe or two that will always be a part of their repertory. They are recipes that, unlike her cassoulet, come together in minutes, not days.

These are not the showpieces you make once in a lifetime (and talk about forever) like her coq au vin or pâté en croute. They are under-the-radar basics, like the tomato sauce with Provençal notes of orange peel and coriander seeds that my family makes every September, when bushels of overripe plum tomatoes arrive at local farm stands. Do we peel and seed the tomatoes? No. Do we have cheesecloth on hand for wrapping the herb bouquet? Sometimes. But is it always Julia Child's recipe, and a great one? Absolutely.

Alpana Singh, a sommelier in Chicago, often makes clafoutis from the master recipe on Page 655.

"You're just making a batter and pouring it over some gorgeous seasonal fruit," she said. "I love it because it's like a Dutch baby pancake, but it's somehow an elegant dessert, and it's not too sweet."

ONLINE: YOUR FAVORITES

Do you have a cherished Julia Child recipe? Share your favorite dish, the one you return to time and again.

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The notion that Child's fundamental recipes have lost their relevance makes some cooks downright indignant.

"I don't see how there could be an easier recipe," said Reges Linders, a home cook in Arlington, Mass., referring to the book's classic gratin dauphinois. And indeed, after rubbing the baking dish with garlic and slicing the potatoes ⅛-inch thick, there isn't much more to be done except pour in milk, cheese and a half-stick of butter.

What of the many modern cooks who recoil from recipes with carbohydrates and butterfat? Well, Ms. Linders countered, she still uses Child's marinade seche for grilled pork tenderloin: "really just a dry rub, but so good; it's the allspice that really makes it" and "her braised leeks make a great side dish for almost anything."

"Mastering the Art of French Cooking" was an odd beast from the beginning, an attempt to forge a mind-meld between professional French chefs and untrained American housewives, many of them content with the era's convenience foods like frank-and-bean casseroles and Tang.

During the nearly 10 years she worked on it, Child had an absolute conviction — shared by almost no one — that her book would be useful to American cooks. The manuscript was rejected by the original publisher; another house cautiously agreed to take it on, offering a $1,500 advance to be shared with the book's French co-authors, Louisette Bertholle and Simone Beck.

"They expected it to sell a few thousand copies," said Bob Spitz, the author of "Dearie," a new biography of Child.

But the review in this newspaper by Craig Claiborne (in the section then known as "Food Family Fashions Furnishings") was glowing, calling the book "comprehensive, laudable and monumental." (An accompanying headline raved "Text is Simply Written for Persons Who Enjoy Cuisine.") And more significantly, Child began her popular programs on public television.

"It was going on television in 1963, the same year as the Beatles, that made it possible for her to become a popular icon," Mr. Spitz said.

Her books have now sold more than six million copies and inspired cults around certain recipes, made up of cooks who may have nothing else in common. Virginia Willis, a cook and writer in Atlanta, and Scott Anderson, a yoga teacher in the Bay Area, are both devoted to the book's Reine de Saba, or Queen of Sheba, a dense and nearly flourless chocolate cake that is virtually foolproof and very beautiful, ringed with toasted sliced almonds.

And her French potato salad, made without mayonnaise but with warm potatoes, shallots, herbs and glugs of olive oil, is equally loved by Mary Hubbard, a retired teacher in Texas who said it reminded her of her German grandmother's recipe, and by Alex Young, the chef at Zingerman's Roadhouse in Ann Arbor, Mich.

Many cooks fall back on her pillowy gougères, super-impressive but fast cheese puffs. One is Ken Oringer, the chef at Clio and other restaurants in Boston, who has pushed for, and just received, permission to erect a bronze statue of Child in the city. She lived in nearby Cambridge from 1963 to 2001, and died in California in 2004.

"She loved bone marrow and truffles and pigs' trotters, but the gougères are the pure essence of Julia as a chef," Mr. Oringer said. In other words, the recipe is precise, encouraging and functional.

The same goes for Child's no-boil method for hard-cooked eggs.

"One of her favorite things to make for lunch when we were working was SA-LADE NI-ÇOISE!" said Sara Moulton, the chef, breaking into the fluty warble that spawned a thousand parodies. She was Child's assistant on television and book projects, and said that because of her, she is incapable of taking certain shortcuts in the kitchen.

"I can't not peel asparagus and broccoli because of her," Ms. Moulton said. "I feel her looking over my shoulder."

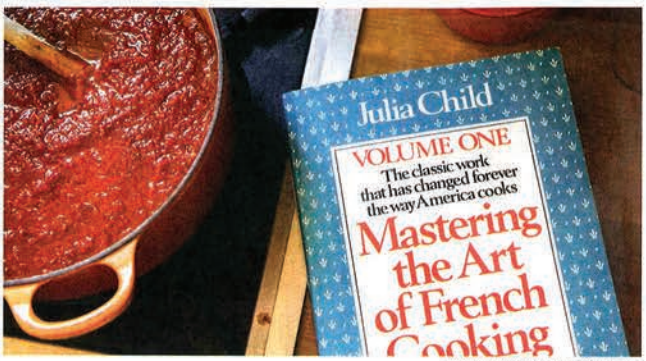
Many cooks feel the same. For Judith Norell, a vegetarian and owner of the Silver Moon bakery in Manhattan; for the writer Julie Powell, who spent a year cooking every recipe in the book for the blog that became "Julie & Julia," the movie; and for the chef Laurent Géroli at the Brown Hotel in Louisville, Ky., Child's famously fussy method for ratatouille — in which the eggplant, zucchini and tomatoes are all diced small, cooked separately — is still the only way.

"By going the longer road, she keeps the flavor and texture of all those vegetables robust and intense," Ms. Powell said.

Naomi Duguid is a cook, writer and photographer who worked with Child on the cookbook "Baking With Julia" and other projects. She herself never cooks from recipes, she said (and as she spends much of the year in Southeast Asia, cooking from "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" would hardly be practical). But she thinks of Julia Child often: when she makes an omelet, when she needs to improvise and when things go terribly wrong.

And they do, in all kitchens: cakes get stuck, mayonnaises break, chickens catch fire. But Child was unflappable in the face of culinary disaster.

"It was Julia's basic course in good conduct: she stayed calm and learned to laugh about mistakes rather than getting angry or frustrated," Ms. Duguid said. "She was the marvelous opposite of a control freak, and that translates for me every day in the kitchen."



PHOTOGRAPHS BY EVAN SUNG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

COULIS DE TOMATES À LA PROVENÇALE
(TOMATO SAUCE WITH MEDITERRANEAN FLAVORS)

Adapted from "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" by Julia Child (Knopf, 1961)
Time: About 1½ hours

- ¼ cup olive oil
- ⅔ cup minced yellow onions
- Kosher salt and black pepper
- 4 teaspoons all-purpose flour
- 5 to 6 pounds ripe tomatoes, quartered
- ⅛ teaspoon sugar, more to taste
- 4 cloves garlic, minced or put through a press
- A large herb bouquet: 8 sprigs parsley, 1 bay leaf and 4 sprigs thyme, all tied in cheesecloth
- ¼ teaspoon fennel seeds
- ½ teaspoon dried basil, oregano, marjoram or savory
- Large pinch saffron threads
- 1 dozen coriander seeds, lightly crushed
- 1 2-inch piece dried orange peel (or ½ teaspoon granules)
- 2 to 3 tablespoons tomato paste (optional).

1. In a large heavy pot, heat the oil over medium-low heat. Add onions, sprinkle with salt and cook slowly for about 10 minutes, until tender but not browned. Sprinkle on flour and cook slowly for 3 minutes, stirring occasionally; do not brown.

2. Meanwhile, fit a food processor with the coarse grating blade. Working in batches, push tomatoes through feed tube to make a coarse purée.

3. Stir tomatoes, sugar, garlic, herb bouquet, fennel, basil, saffron, coriander, orange peel and 1 teaspoon salt into pot. Cover and cook slowly for 10 minutes, so the tomatoes will render their juice. Uncover and simmer for about an hour, until thick. The sauce is done when it tastes cooked and is thick enough to form a mass in the spoon. Remove herb bouquet and taste. Season with salt, pepper, sugar and tomato paste, and simmer two minutes more. Sauce may be used immediately, refrigerated or frozen for up to 6 months.

Yield: About 1 quart.

PORK WITH MARINADE SÈCHE
(PORK WITH ALLSPICE DRY RUB)

Adapted from "Mastering the Art of French Cooking"
Time: At least 1½ hours, plus at least 6 hours' marinating

- 1 3- to 4-pound boneless pork roast, well marbled, or 2 large tenderloins for the grill
- 4 teaspoons kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme or sage leaves
- 1 bay leaf, crushed
- ¼ teaspoon ground allspice
- 2 cloves garlic, minced or put through a press.

1. Dry the meat well. In a bowl or a mortar, mix the remaining ingredients and rub into the surface of the pork. Place in a covered dish and marinate in the refrigerator for at least 6 hours or up to 2 days. Turn the meat 2 or 3 times if the marinade is a short one; several times a day if longer.

2. Heat oven to 325 degrees or a grill to medium-high. Scrape off the marinade and dry the meat well.

3. For roasting, place meat on a rack in a shallow pan and turn often until just cooked through, about 30 minutes per pound or until internal temperature reaches 140 degrees.

4. For grilling, place tenderloins on oiled grate, cover and cook for 12 to 15 minutes, turning every 2 minutes, or until internal temperature reaches 140 degrees. Cover meat with foil and let rest 10 minutes before slicing.

Yield: 8 to 10 servings.

CLAFOUTIS AUX MÛRES OU AUX MYRTILLES
(BLACKBERRY OR BLUEBERRY FLAN)

Adapted from "Mastering the Art of French Cooking"
Time: 1 hour

- Butter for pan
- 1¼ cups whole or 2 percent milk
- ⅔ cup granulated sugar, divided
- 3 eggs
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup flour
- 1 pint (2 generous cups) blackberries or blueberries, rinsed and well drained
- Powdered sugar in a shaker.

1. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly butter a medium-size flameproof baking dish at least 1½ inches deep.

2. Place the milk, ⅓ cup granulated sugar, eggs, vanilla, salt and flour in a blender. Blend at top speed until smooth and frothy, about 1 minute.

3. Pour a ¼-inch layer of batter in the baking dish. Turn on a stove burner to low and set dish on top for a minute or two, until a film of batter has set in the bottom of the dish. Remove from heat.

4. Spread berries over the batter and sprinkle on the remaining ⅓ cup granulated sugar. Pour on the rest of the batter and smooth with the back of a spoon. Place in the center of the oven and bake about 50 minutes, until top is puffed and browned and a tester plunged into its center comes out clean.

5. Sprinkle with powdered sugar just before serving. (Clafoutis need not be served hot, but should still be warm. It will sink slightly as it cools.)

Yield: 6 to 8 servings.