WOMEN OF WISDOM

TALKS WITH WOMEN WHO SHAPED OUR TIMES

Julia Child

By Lynn Gilbert
with Gaylen Moore

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Dedication

To the women of the past, who made a difference,
the women of today who keep the goal of equality aloft,
and the women of tomorrow in whom we entrust our future.

— Lynn Gilbert

Julia Child in her apartment, photograph by Lynn Gilbert ©1978, New York City.

Julia Child

(born 1921, Peoria, Illinois—died 2006, Washington, DC) launched the contemporary women's liberation movement when her book The Feminine Mystique, published in 1963, exploded the fifties myth of the happy homemaker. As a writer, lecturer, and organizer, she was the ideologue of a movement that in a few short years changed attitudes and behavior at all levels of society. She was one of the founders of the National Organization for Women and became its first president in 1966

I WAS THIRTY-TWO WHEN I started cooking; up until then, I just ate. I think it kind of crawled up on me. My mother didn't cook because I grew up in an era when most all middle-income people had maids. So she never learned, and I never really learned at all. But my grandmother was a great cook. She grew up in the farming country of Illinois—she made doughnuts and cakes and wonderful chicken, as I remember. We always had good food at her house, and at our house, too—plain good American food. But we never discussed it; it was expected to be good.

After college I worked in public relations and advertising, and then my mother got very sick so I went home and helped take care of her. After she died, the war came along, and I eventually went to work for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), first in Washington, and then in the China-Burma-India theater, and that's where I met my future husband, Paul. We were married after the war, and that's when I started to cook. Paul remained in the government service, and we were sent to France. He spoke beautiful French, and had lived there with his family in the 1920s. He knew about food and wines, and his mother was a wonderful cook, from all reports.

It was great fun living in France. We got to Paris in 1949 and spent five years there, then we had two years in Marseille. I had to go to school to learn French; I went to Berlitz every day for two hours, and then we made some French friends almost immediately. So one learned by being thrown into it.

I was hysterical about everything in France. I thought it was so wonderful, and it took me several years at least to calm down and not be so pro-French. After one taste of French food, after our very first meal in France, at Rouen, on the way from Le Havre to Paris in our old blue Buick that we had brought over with us on the boat—after that first unforgettable lunch, I was hooked. I'd never eaten like that before, I didn't know such food existed. The wonderful attention paid to each detail of the meal was incredible to me. I'd never really drunk good wine before, and knew nothing at all about it. It was simply a whole new life experience.

But you don't spring into good cooking naked. You have to have some training.

You have to learn how to eat. It's like looking at a painting: If you don't have any kind of background, you don't really know what you're looking at. The French have training from their families, they grow up with an appreciation of food, that it is an art, that it is worth considering carefully and looking at. I had to learn, and both cooking and taste developed simultaneously for me.

In those days the Cordon Bleu cooking school had some wonderful chefs of the old school, and I decided to enroll. Why not? There was only my husband and my pussycat to look out for, and as soon as I got our living arrangements settled and a little French at my command, I started in. I was able to take the serious course that was designed for people going into the business—which meant that I entered a class of former GIs, who were studying under the GI Bill of Rights. (This was in 1950, and the war was barely over.) They very kindly didn't object to my joining them, nor did their fine old chef, Max Bugnard, in his seventies and trained in the fine old ways. We started in at seven a.m., cooked until eleven, then I rushed home to cook lunch for Paul—our embassy followed the French hours, which meant a two-hour lunch period when everyone came home to eat with the family and then I rushed back in the afternoon for the demonstrations. That's how I got started, and I never looked back.

I stayed at the Cordon Bleu for as long as I thought useful, which was six months or so—until they began repeating fancy dishes like poulet en chaud-froid several times. After one or two hassles with that you have it. It was expensive, too, and we were living on a very strict budget. Just when I felt I'd spent enough of my money there, I met my future colleague, Simone Beck. She was mad about cooking, too, and was delighted to find a kindred spirit, because way back then not many middle-class people had even the slightest interest in it. She asked me to join a French ladies' gastronomical club, and that, for me, was a sort of postgraduate course. It meant talking and spending time cooking and eating entirely with French people, and that made a tremendous difference to me because I got their attitudes and points of view about good food, menus, gastronomy and so forth. And Simca, who was just a few years older than I, had been cooking since her childhood. I learned an awful lot from her.

I was planning to go into this cooking thing very seriously and take a long time studying and learning, but then I was suddenly thrown into it for keeps. After I had met Simca, I also met her friend and colleague, Louisette Bertholle, also a member of the gastronomy club, Le Cercle des Gourmettes. She and Simca were working on a cookbook for the United States, which had been going on for some time. One day the three of us had invited some American friends of mine for lunch. They wanted cooking lessons but said they didn't want to go to the Cordon Bleu because they didn't speak French, and so why didn't we teach them? I thought, My heavens, I wasn't nearly ready for that. But Simca, who is always ready for anything and was far more experienced than either Louisette or I, said, "Well, why not?" And we started our cooking school, L'Ecole des Trois Gourmandes, just about the next day.

Of course, we learned an awful lot by doing, and we often were able to get our two fine chefs, Bugnard and Claude Thilmont, a *patissier*, from the Cordon Bleu. They loved coming to us, they enjoyed showing off to our ohs and ahs, our pupils loved it, and we literally had free lessons every time from them, of course. We all had a very good time, never took more than eight students but preferred six, and it was a completely participation class. We cooked an entire meal, then invited guests to participate—often husbands, and always Paul. But guests had to pay 350 francs for the meal with wine. That was only one dollar then, and certainly one of the best and cheapest meals in Paris. It was lots of fun for us then, but loads of work, and sometimes we didn't make expenses at all. You know how people are, they wouldn't show up and there we'd be with all that food. We never did figure that one out.

We kept up the school together for about a year and a half, and during that time the American collaborator working on the book with Simca and Louisette faded out of the picture—I don't remember why. But I was delighted, because I really wanted to get in on the act. I had found that most of the cookbooks I read didn't give enough detail, and I thought we could really do something to explain French cooking to America. So we started in, and it took us nine years to write the first draft of that cookbook. Of course we were learning while doing, and were being very thorough indeed. Our first submission, nine hundred pages on French sauces

and French poultry, was roundly rejected. It went into the most infinite detail on every aspect; it was really an academic treatise which was, as our first editor pointed out, utterly unpublishable. She suggested we write a regular cookbook.

By that time Paul and I had moved from Paris to Marseille, to Bonn in Germany, and back to Washington, D.C. Simca had come to America on her first visit, and was here for the rejection. I was crushed, but she, as always undaunted, was all for going on and giving them a regular cookbook. That took another two or three years, and by the time that was finished, we had been posted to Norway. It was still a long and detailed book, because it was a teaching book, and had come out of our experiences with our school. Simca and Louisette kept on with the school in Paris, and I gave lessons wherever I happened to be. Louisette, who has now published three books of her own, did not then take a large part in the final version for personal reasons, and it was Simca and I who batted chapters and recipes back and forth, she in French and I in English. But that new version was also rejected by our Boston publisher as being just too complicated and special for them. Luckily our Cambridge friend, Avis DeVoto, who had introduced us to the first publisher, had another up her sleeve, the house of Knopf. She sent the manuscript to them and some of their people, who were cooks, liked it. And that's how we finally got published, and I have been with the same editor ever since.

By the time the book was in galleys, my Paul had resigned from the diplomatic service and we had moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts. The book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, came out in the fall of 1961. Simca came over again to this country, and we invented our own publicity tour. At that point, as far as I know, nobody ever did anything of that kind. But Simca, always full of vim and vigor, said, "Well, we'll just go to Detroit and Chicago and California, and get hold of all our friends and give demonstrations." That's what we did, and I'm sure it helped us a lot because we were unknown, and had to get a start somewhere.

Then Simca went back to France and we came back to Boston and I was giving cooking lessons. I found the best way to do it and not keep losing money was to invite likely customers for lunch at our house, and then tell them that I'd love to

give them cooking lessons, but in their own kitchens. Much better, said I; then they'd be using their own stove and own equipment, and could get their own friends to be cooking along with them. That meant, also, that they bought the food and wine, and they had to do the washing up. I arrived an hour before class, got the preparations ready, then we cooked and laughed and lunched, and I got my fee and left them with the dishes. It worked out very well for all concerned.

At the same time our local educational television station had a book review program, and a friend of ours suggested that perhaps we could get our book on the show. The man who did it was a very literary type; the idea of a cookbook didn't appeal to him at all, but he agreed. Well, you can't talk for half an hour about cooking, so I brought my own little hot plate and made an omelette on the air, and beat up some egg whites in my big copper bowl. Afterwards quite a number of people wrote in and said to the station that it would be nice to have a cooking program. The station asked us if we were interested, and although we had hardly ever seen television at that point (having lived abroad for so long), we said, "Sure, why not?" We did three pilot shows which were aired locally in the summer of 1961, and there was indeed interest in cooking. The station asked us about doing thirteen more shows, and we again said, "Why not?" Then other stations wanted it, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Chicago, New York. And that's how the French Chef series got started, little by little.

In those early days, 1963, the J. F. Kennedys were in the White House. There was a lot of talk about Mrs. Kennedy's fine French chef, Rene Verdon, and the wonderful French food at the White House. More Americans, too, were beginning to go abroad and to appreciate the finer things of life, and it was a pretty flush period in the economy, as I remember. Suddenly there was a great deal of interest in French cuisine, much more than there had ever been before. I was in the middle of it, happening to be the right woman at the right time. Very lucky for me.

I think you have to decide who your audience is. If you don't pick your audience, you're lost because you're not really talking to anybody. My audience is people

who like to cook, who want to really learn how to do it. I don't pay any attention to other people because they wouldn't look at such a program anyway. I'm a teacher. I like it. I want people to be able to do things that will turn out properly. Of course, I am interested in people who want to learn, and my books are written for people who really want to cook, and to cook the right way. If you are going to make French bread, for instance, you want to make the best possible bread—or, at least, I think you should want that. It should have the best possible texture and taste, and if it doesn't, why bother doing it?

I had assumed it would be impossible to make French bread at home with American flour—I just assumed that, without ever having tried it. No French people ever make bread at all at home—unthinkable. But while we were writing Volume II of Mastering, our editor suggested we try French bread because there were so many people who wanted to make their own. That interested my husband, Paul, so we started experimenting on it in Cambridge. We tried sourdough, and all the American recipes we could find for French bread-there were none in French cookbooks, of course- but it never turned out to be quite like the best French bread in France. However, I knew of a professional baker in Paris, Raymond Calvel, who taught at a school for bakers, and I wrote to Simca asking if she couldn't look him up. So she arranged it, and the next time Paul and I were in Paris we spent a fascinating day with him. Because Simca and I had spent so much time on yeast and doughs, we knew immediately what he was talking about and what he was doing, and we gradually saw what we had been doing wrong—which was just about everything. Our dough had been too stiff, it hadn't risen nearly enough, it wasn't formed correctly, and we needed a hot baking surface for our oven, as well as steam.

As soon as we arrived back at our little house in Provence, we started in anew. Paul, who is a practical Yankee and very good with his hands, got us a big sheet of asbestos cement (we later changed to quarry tiles) for our hot baking surface in the oven. Then he used a pan of water in the bottom of the oven into which he plunged a red-hot firebrick when the time came; it made a perfect burst of steam for those essential first five minutes of baking. We worked on the forming

techniques and the rising—Paul taking photographs for our illustrator to follow when the recipe was ready for the book. Finally, I think we managed to make about as good a facsmile of professional French bread as one can make in a home oven. It took us two or three years to perfect, and I think it is one of the best things we have done. Now our system is used by many home cooks as the normal way.

It took us fifteen years to develop a technique for making French puff pastry. Ordinary American flour, the all-purpose type, just does not work properly. Simca and I tried many a system and formula, and it would rise nicely, but it was just not the tender flaky wonder that it should have been. The real breakthrough came when I was filming White House Red Carpet during the Johnson administration—how the White House entertains. They had a fine French pastry chef there in the kitchen, Ferdinand Louvat, who had made some perfectly splendid and tremendous vol-au-vents for the banquet's first course; those cases were cylinders about twelve inches across and five inches high, tenderly flaky and buttery, just first-class in every way. I asked him what flour he used, expecting some special chef's mixture. Oh no, he said, he used unbleached all-purpose white flour and plain bleached cake flour, one part cake flour to every four of all-purpose. We had tried cake flour, Simca and I, way back in the 1950s, but it hadn't worked out—we'd not experimented enough with proportions, and we never pursued it. It was one of those instances when you think you've tried everything but you haven't tried hard enough. But that experience with the White House pastry chef put us on the right track, and puff pastry appeared in all its glory in our Volume II.

Provided you have fine ingredients, I think that cooking is mostly a matter of technique. And it's the technique that I am interested in trying to show, because if you master that you can do whatever you want. Although there is much decrying of classical cooking nowadays, and of Escoffier and so on and so forth, I do think most of the talk is from people who are not real students of cooking. The classical training teaches you what to do with food and how to do it. If you don't have that background, you really have nothing solid to depend on. Of course, you have to develop your taste for food, but that comes from experience—from eating, discussing, studying, experimenting—from taking food seriously.

With a solid classical background, you are ready for improvisation. That is what is happening in France, now, with their so-called nouvelle cuisine. The chefs and society have released French cooking from the straitjacket of classical dishes, and it has now become accepted—even demanded—that the chefs improvise and create. Unfortunately, because that is the present mode, you do get cooks who have little taste and training who produce dishes that are quite inedible and utterly strange; they do it because they feel they must be new and different. But judging from our last trip to France, I believe things are settling down and much of the silliness is no longer acceptable. At least I hope so! As a friend said to me the other day, “No wonder the old-fashioned French cuisine was so popular—it was so damned good to eat!”

To be a good cook you have to have a love of the good, a love of hard work, and a love of creating. Some people like to paint pictures, or do gardening, or build a boat in the basement. Other people get a tremendous pleasure out of the kitchen, because cooking is just as creative and imaginative an activity as drawing, or wood carving, or music. And cooking draws upon your every talent—science, mathematics, energy, history, experience—and the more experience you have the less likely are your experiments to end in drivel and disaster. The more you know, the more you can create. There’s no end to imagination in the kitchen.

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