

# EVERYONE'S IN THE KITCHEN WITH JULIA

By Lewis H. Lapham

She may lose the butter or even drop the turkey in the sink, but Julia Child has won a devoted TV following by combining classic cookery with comedy.

To many American housewives the art of French cooking seems an impenetrable riddle, as mysterious as Einstein's theory of relativity and just about as practical. Intimidated by the condescending waiters in first-class French restaurants, they meekly accept the management's insinuation that such things as *timbales d'asperges* or *tournedos Rossini* must remain forever beyond their understanding. Within the last 18 months, however, the more courageous housewives have roused themselves from their habit of self-effacement and followed the vigorous example of Julia Child.

A tall and determined woman, cheerful, steadfast and pure in heart, Mrs. Child appears as *The French Chef* on a weekly television show that is as funny as it is instructive. Although an excellent cook, she possesses none of the pretentious mannerisms so often associated with practitioners of *haute cuisine*. She moves around in front of the camera utterly preoccupied with the problem at hand, addressing the television audience as if she were talking to herself or to a trusted friend.

Each of her cooking lessons has about it the uncertainty of a reckless adventure. She has a way of losing things—either the butter, or the carrots she so carefully chopped into small cubes or, on one memorable occasion, a pot of cauliflower. Sometimes she forgets to put the seasoning in the ragout; sometimes she drops a turkey in the sink.

But to Mrs. Child these slight misfortunes are of no importance, merely the expected hazards of a long and dirty war. Smiling and undismayed, secure in the knowledge that her cause is just, she bashes on, perhaps pausing to remark, as she did once of a potato pancake spilled on a sideboard, "If this happens, just scoop it back into the pan; remember that you are alone in the kitchen and nobody can see you."

When, at the end of the program, she at last brings the finished dish to the table, she does so with an air of delighted surprise, pleased to announce that once again the forces of art and reason have triumphed over primeval chaos.

Her sense of theater endears her to the most fiercely devoted and most unlikely audience ever to write fan letters to a television cook. Beginning in 1963 as a casual experiment scheduled at miscellaneous hours by WGBH, the educational-television station in Cambridge, Mass., *The French Chef* soon occupied prime evening time on educational stations in 16 cities, among them San Francisco, Washington, Philadelphia and New York. Next month stations in 17 other cities will start carrying the program.

As might be expected, the bulk of Mrs. Child's 400 letters a week come from

grateful housewives who see in her a woman like themselves, harried by the same accidents of nature and subject to the same budget. (For the purposes of demonstration, Mrs. Child uses only those vegetables or cuts of meat available at reasonable prices in any market.)

A surprising number of letters, however, arrive from people who know or care nothing about food but prize Mrs. Child chiefly for her ingenious wit. In New York's Greenwich Village, for instance, a coterie of avant-garde painters and musicians gathers each week in a loft to watch *The French Chef*, convinced that Mrs. Child is far more diverting than any professional comedian.

At first they assumed that she was doing a parody of the traditional cooking program, but even the discovery that she was playing it straight failed to dull their enthusiasm. In the garrets around Washington Square the introduction to the lesson on artichokes stands as the authoritative example of Mrs. Child's humor and style.

The scene opened on an artichoke boiling in a pot of water and shrouded by a piece of cheesecloth. Mrs. Child, looming suddenly into view, lifted the cheesecloth with heavy tweezers and inquired, "What's cooking under this gossamer veil? Why here's a great big, bad artichoke, and some people are afraid of it."

Of the other two remarks still quoted in the coffeehouses, the first concerned a chicken in a frying pan. "We just leave it there," said Mrs. Child, "letting it make simple little cooking noises." The second had to do with crepes suzette. As she put a match to it, she said, "You must be careful not to set your hair on fire."

In the less-threatening circumstances of her own home in Cambridge, Mrs. Child reveals herself as an even more engaging woman than she seems on television. She stands over six feet tall (her dress size she describes as "stately"), her eyes are grayish green, her hair brown and her complexion freckled.

With her husband, Paul Child, she lives in a clapboard house, three stories high and 12 minutes' walk from the Harvard campus. The walls in her kitchen glitter with enough pots and pans to equip a small restaurant.

Sitting in her garden one day recently, with a tossed salad and a *terrine de dinde* (pâté stuffed with the white meat of a turkey), she confessed that as a young girl she seldom even fried an egg. "The kitchen seemed a dismal bother; I had no reason to go there."

Born in Pasadena, Calif., in 1912, she graduated from Smith College and thereafter "lived a lovely butterfly life," until, at the outbreak of World War II she volunteered for the OSS. She hoped to become a spy but was sent instead to Ceylon

as a file clerk. There in 1943 she met her husband, a painter who had been turned into a map maker by the OSS.

Equally accomplished as a photographer, a violinist and a judo expert, Paul Child had lived in Paris in the 1920's, carving copies of antique French furniture and selling them to tourists. He married Julia after the war and returned to France as an officer of the U.S. Information Agency. Familiar with the language and the better restaurants, he introduced his wife to French cooking. "An intoxicating revelation," she recalls. "I was bilious for two months."

Her indigestion soon passed and, not having any children to care for, she enrolled at the Cordon Bleu, the celebrated French cooking school. She studied with a disciple of the immortal Auguste Escoffier and within six months had learned enough to enter *Le Cercle des Gourmets*, a group of trusting Frenchwomen who met twice a month to try out their experiments on one another.

## Practiced on students

Together with two other women in the group, Simone Beck and Louise Bertholle, she then established her own cooking school in Paris and began working on her book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. "We were fortunate," Mrs. Child says, "in having our students to practice on."

The book took 12 years to write, the Childs meanwhile moving around Europe as Paul worked at U.S. consulates in Marseilles, Bonn and Oslo. They settled in Cambridge in 1961, the year that Paul retired from government service and Julia's book was published.

Now in its fifth printing, the book has already sold over 100,000 copies at \$10 a copy. The critics thought it definitive.

Mrs. Child's premise is that French cooking is "neither so long, so rich nor so complicated" that it cannot be accomplished by anybody willing to take the necessary trouble. "It doesn't have to be fancy," she says, "but you have to care about what you buy; squeeze the tomatoes, shun the bottled salad dressing—that sort of thing."

Although she admits to a weakness for frozen Lima beans and canned beets, Mrs. Child otherwise orders fresh vegetables. She also cuts her own meat. Her breakfast consists of fruit and tea; her lunch of a cold dish and a salad. Even at dinner, the principal meal of the day, both she and Paul eat sparingly, fearful that if they once gave way to temptation, they both would gain 20 pounds.

Mrs. Child's introduction to television occurred within a year of her arrival in Cambridge. A friend at WGBH invited her to discuss her newly published book

in an interview but before she could do so, the station burned to the ground. Several months later, as a gesture of commiseration, in a makeshift studio in a warehouse, she offered to demonstrate the making of an omelet.

Remembering that first sight of Mrs. Child, Russell Morash, now the producer and director of *The French Chef*, said, "I thought to myself, Who is this mad-woman cooking an omelet on a book-review program?" Exuberantly smashing eggs, gossiping about the merits of copper pans, Mrs. Child enthralled all those who saw her. She proved to be, in the words of her husband, "a natural clown." The station promptly engaged her for a series of 26 demonstration films and for each show she received a fee of about \$50.

The filming takes place in a model kitchen on the second floor of a gas-and-electric company's plant. A mirror dangles from two chains in the ceiling above the stove, thus allowing the cameraman to photograph the food in the pots.

On one recent and typical rehearsal day, Mrs. Child arrived at the gas plant at nine A.M. She wore her customary costume: a khaki blouse, a blue denim apron and tattersall sneakers. Half an hour later the production crew appeared, lugging their lights and cameras up a fire escape on the rear of the building. Twenty minutes before the cameras rolled, Mrs. Child checked a list of ingredients and utensils with Ruth Lockwood, assistant producer of the show.

"Wooden spoon," said Mrs. Lockwood.

"Wooden spoon," repeated Mrs. Child. "Parsley sprigs," said Mrs. Lockwood.

"Check," said Mrs. Child.

And so forth, through a list that included olive oil, macaroons, butcher knives, scallions, squares of wax paper, vermouth, cucumbers and 74 other items.

Mrs. Child and Mrs. Lockwood (who has gained 15 pounds since coming to the show) then rehearsed the entire program, blocking out stage movements and timing each part of the cooking process. If the lesson deals with a volatile substance (pastry, hollandaise sauce, etc.) they provide at least two sets of all the important ingredients to insure themselves against catastrophe. In the 68 shows that Mrs. Child has so far filmed, the cameras have stopped on only six occasions, the most spectacular of these being the times when a soufflé fell and when a kidney flambé failed to catch fire.

The morning after that rehearsal, Mrs. Child turned up at the studio once again for the actual filming of a show on lamb stew. "I'm Julia Child," she said into the camera, "and today we're going to prove that lamb stew can be French too." She began with a finished stew in the oven, a





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half-done stew simmering in a pot on the stove and the materials for a third stew arranged before her on cutting boards. The demonstration was distinguished by only one minor error. At the moment when Mrs. Child proudly picked up the stew and said with a flourish, "And now we put it in the refrigerator," Mrs. Lockwood flapped her hands excitedly. "Of course I don't mean the refrigerator," said Mrs. Child, unperturbed, "I mean we put it in the oven."

Her husband, watching from behind the cameras, smiled indulgently. Throughout the filming he busied himself with the mixing of beef extract and water in a wine bottle. Although Mrs. Child uses real

wine for her cooking, the synthetic wine is placed on the table setting at the end of the program to save money. ("You don't have to use liquor," she once informed her audience, "but it'll taste more French if you do.")

Immediately after Mrs. Child finished her demonstration, the set filled with a crowd of hungry cameramen, secretaries, technicians, assistants and unidentified persons introducing themselves simply as "friends of WGBH." Morash walked in off the fire escape and peered into the pots on the stove. "The best lunch in town," he said, "certainly the best free lunch." While 18 people feasted on the day's lesson, Mrs. Child watched

from a polite distance. "Most of the food in this country is frightful," she said. "It's because people don't care enough, just a matter of bad habits."

Living always in the hope of correcting those bad habits, Mrs. Child thinks of herself as a missionary instructing a noble but savage race in a civilized art. The result of her teaching first manifests itself in markets and hardware stores.

The morning after her show, grocers find themselves surrounded by women clamoring for whatever Mrs. Child discussed the night before. The requests vary from city to city, because the different stations broadcast her films on different schedules. Thus a lady in San

Francisco could be demanding fish heads on the same morning that a lady in New York asks for chicken livers.

Mrs. Child's own butcher, Jack Savenor, offers similar evidence. He reports that after she cooked a goose on TV, he had a big run on geese. "I mean, how many geese do you think a guy could sell in a year?" he says. "Maybe six, maybe seven. But the week after she works on the goose, I sell sixty-five."

Mrs. Child's photograph, clipped from a newspaper, decorates Savenor's meat scale. And he takes great pride in her patronage. "She does such justice to the meat," he says. "She gives us honor; she gives us profit."

THE END

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