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Child of the '60s

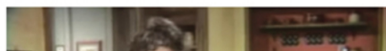
Remembering the unstoppable chef's TV show.

MELANIE REHAK

In the autumn of 2007, I moderated a panel at the New York Public Library called “Julia Child in America.” Its subject was Child’s ongoing and outsize effect on American cooking and food culture. It had been convened on the occasion of a new biography of Child written by one of the panelists, the estimable food historian Laura Shapiro. The other participants were no less expert and engaging: chef Dan Barber of Blue Hill and Blue Hill at Stone Barns, food writer David Kamp, and cookbook author, editor, and FOJ (friend of Julia) Molly O’Neill. Over the course of the conversation, we discussed celebrity chefs, how Julia (with whom we all presumed to be a on first-name basis, naturally) had helped clear the path for people like Barber by making good food more approachable, big agriculture, and the fact that Julia thought Alice Waters, as O’Neill succinctly put it, was “out of her mind” (among other things, she apparently couldn’t get past the idea that picking a single perfect peach and serving it for dessert unadorned wasn’t the height of laziness). Two of the four panelists attempted to reproduce Julia’s patently inimitable accent. One compared her to Howard Cosell. But none of this even came close to entrancing the audience the way Julia herself did, in a series of clips I’d chosen from her public-television cooking show *The French Chef*, which began airing on WGBH in Boston in 1963 after a successful three-pilot test series.

Among them was a bit from the episode on bouillabaisse, in which she explains with characteristically pleasant bombast that “all it is, really, is a plain fisherman’s stew made out of the day’s catch, or the unsalable leftovers. Unfortunately, when you get a famous recipe like this, the *gour-METS*”—I can still recall the whoops of delight from the NYPL audience at her pronunciation of this word—“get hold of it, and they fancy it up so much and say do this, do that, or that’s not the real thing that us ordinary people feel that it’s impossible to do and terribly expensive.” I also included the infamous “butter massage” moment, from the episode on how to truss and roast a chicken. (“I really think the actual massage is beneficial to it, because it gets right into that skin and that gives it a lovely flavor and it helps it brown nicely!”) My final pick was perhaps her most-remembered and best-loved piece of advice-*cum*-camaraderie, offered in episode twenty-eight, aka “The Potato Show.” After trying to flip a potato pancake only to have it crumble disastrously, Julia looks directly at the camera: “Well, that didn’t go very well,” she says, somehow both jauntily *and* philosophically. “I didn’t have the courage to do it the way I should have. You can always pick it up if you’re alone in the kitchen. Who is going to see?”

Who, indeed? Well, everyone who soon came to think of *The French Chef* as required watching for people who cared about food, that’s who. Demand for the show exploded almost immediately, as Child discusses in the foreword to *The French Chef Cookbook*, published in 1968. The book, which goes episode by episode, begins with the fourteenth show, because, as she explains, “the first thirteen shows no longer exist. . . . Before WGBH-TV realized duplicates were needed to serve other educational stations throughout the country the first thirteen tapes had worn out.” Then, because even Julia Child, in her big, comfortable house in Cambridge, was not impermeable to the changes sweeping the country and the language being used to describe them, she wades into a gonzo description of those lost episodes as gamely as she does a cheese soufflé in episode eighty-six: “I am glad of it. Although they did possess some of the unpredictable quality of a contemporary happening, their demise allowed us to do over all but one of those recipes later on when we were more expert.” It suddenly becomes possible to imagine her as a six-foot Beatnik, clad in a black turtleneck and beret, lounging in some underground reefer den, her relentless forward motion momentarily tamed.



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Julia Child in four episodes of *The French Chef*, 1971–72. PBS.

But that image fades almost immediately, because Child was, above all else, unstoppable. Though her show was being taped, she nevertheless insisted on doing each episode in one fell swoop (a phrase I can hear her saying as I write it, accompanied by grand gesticulating and all the extra o's she'd no doubt include in "swoop"). She describes one of the few exceptions to this rule during the filming of the Lobster à l'Americaine episode, when she was forced to stop only because "every time I touched the cooktop I got a short-circuit in the microphone against my chest, and kept clutching my breast in a very odd fashion." The show, too, was quite literally unstoppable. In 1968, no one at home could record television programs for reviewing at a later date. There was no such thing as a pause button, either. Julia's devoted fans had to scribble frantically as she cooked on-screen, trying to get down everything she said for later use. They may well have owned her magisterial two-volume *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, but these recipes were different. Instead of twelve pages on how to make a baguette, there were episodes on how to make a "Chicken Dinner for Four in Half an Hour." Many had utterly workaday names like "The Shrimp Show" or "Operation Chicken." They were the brainchild of a person who, as Dana Polan writes in his book *Julia Child's The French Chef*, "cogently and consistently made cooking fun while never losing sight of the utility of basic instruction." A cartoon by Henry R. Martin reproduced in Polan's book captures the Julia-watching home cook's problem perfectly: In it, a woman in an apron with her hands hovering above a bowl, something gloppy dripping off her fingers, looks desperately at a television set pulled up to the counter she's working on. The caption reads: "As soon as the technical difficulties have been cleared up, we'll return to Julia Child."

Hence, the companion cookbook, wherein all the details could be collected and pulled out any time the urge for a French dinner struck. Its publication must have been quite an event in the French-cuisine-obsessed late 1960s as the back cover announces: "All the recipes that Julia

French cuisine blossomed into a new, as the book later announced. All the recipes that Julia Child demonstrated on her first public television series, *The French Chef*—the 119 shows that made Julia a household name and changed forever the way Americans cook.” This heraldry is surrounded by black-and-white photos of Julia in action in the studio kitchen. She wields a mallet ferociously from on high. She whisks. She peers out with twinkly eyes over the top of her half-frame glasses while holding a battered copy of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. She wears her endearing ecote des 3 gourmandes badge on her sensible blouse with pride. On a page titled “Learn Where the Meat Comes From,” there’s a fantastic shot of Julia standing in front of a full side of beef, its legs still attached; on an easel in the background is a butcher’s chart showing every cut of meat. On the opposite page, we see her beating egg whites for a soufflé with a comment about how to make one that “rises to its supreme height,” the tone somehow conveying absolute confidence that any reader will be able to do just that. It is also the tone, of course, of Julia’s voice and persona, which any buyer of this book would have known well from television and heard in their heads as they read, imbuing the printed words with a spirit most other cookbooks of the time didn’t have. Those were analog days; nonetheless, it was almost interactive.

The egg-white photos must have been taken during the shooting of that eighty-sixth show, “The Non-Collapsible Cheese Soufflé.” In the headnote for the episode’s recipe that appears in *The French Chef Cookbook*, Julia dispels with nonsense and intimidation right off the bat. “Most soufflés are prima donnas in the kitchen,” she writes. “They have to be baked just so, and served just when, and are always trembling on the verge of collapse. They are the boss of things, not you.” But you, of course, are the boss in Julia’s world. And so she continues, describing what is, on the surface, a recipe but sounds to me, from a vantage point fifty years on, like a pretty good summary of who Julia herself has always been vis-à-vis the world of cooking: “Here’s a recipe that turns the tables on the soufflé, and puts you in command: You can keep it warm in the oven, you can reheat it, and best of all, you can serve it unmolded so it makes a splendid effect, standing serenely on its platter.” We should all be so composed under pressure.

Melanie Rehak is the author of *Eating for Beginners* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).

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