

Life's Ingredients

Celebrity has the habit of being highly selective. Fame assigns a set of familiar, beloved features that calcify into statues, leaving us with the beauty but also the smaller dimensions of the gallery.

Julia Child has been served but also restricted by her adoring public, and she is forever 50, unintimidated by cholesterol, dropping turkeys (she didn't, actually), and crowned everlastingly in a brown helmet of bedroom hair.

Everything I've read about her indicates that despite her sangfroid and semi-noble birth, she struggled with life much as we do, perhaps more so for the added burden of expectation that comes with her social class. For this reader, her life story is a series of false starts: an early attempt as a writer, a very brief career as an advertising copywriter, and a few years in civil service. Not failures, certainly, yet each has the quality of a search. It's irresistible to picture Julia Child as a novelist or bureaucrat, or a bright, too-ambitious presence at the table during an office meeting. Thankfully, that's not how it went.

What seems to have been swept under the table with the turkey is a very passionate woman, a good mixture of just enough objectivity with an abundance of epicureanism. Julia seems to have been the exception to the rule of fame for divas such as Maria Callas and Madonna. It was from within her priorities as a private individual that her stature was given birth. One truly doubts that her early ambition outlasted her harmonious marriage, and when celebrity found Julia Child it never deserted her simply, it would seem, because it was never *sought*. Yet she was no less of a performer for being a long-lasting one.

Those who search more deeply into the documentation will, at some point, discover a dichotomy between the exacting, peevish author and the theatrical gestures and rounded-off measurements of the television pioneer. Compare any recipe you find in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* with the same dish as prepared by Julia on television and you will discover a genius of adaptation, a circumstantial inventor. When it came to the intimacy of television, the trust with which she gained admittance into so many homes, Julia Child was not above frozen phyllo dough.

If Judy Garland is every gay man's dream of a best friend or clubbing partner, Julia Child is our favorite babysitter. In fact, for many of us she kept just the right hours, bringing her copper pots and carbon steel knives into our lives just after school let out. Maybe others saw her only on sick days, or at holidays or during the summer. In any case she was a part of what it felt like to be at home.

Yet she outpaced Mary Poppins, in the same humble couture, with a startling polymorphism. For here was the glamour of La Belle France, a table of impractical refinement prepared in the solid, unaffordable cookware of the elite. What she did with eggs was *elegant*. Thus she was a wolf in sheep's clothing, of our home but oh so far beyond it. So it was that we all began clarifying butter.

Like everyone, for Julia Child, too, the confident focus of early life gave way to the shapeless universality, the hesitant humility that characterizes vast experience. Her last major cookbook declared, "It's not all about French cooking anymore." Were these the words of a

woman who had lived outside Provence too long? More likely, they were the result of such thorough study that the similarities of national dishes outweighed any disparity.

Late in life Julia herself traded on an acquired commodity: her personal celebrity. Not even Tammy Faye Bakker could escape the socio-sexual leveling ground of media exposure, and Julia was no exception. So she could construct her anecdotes, telling us how hard it was for a woman of her height (6' 2") to shop for clothes on a budget: "I had to elbow drag queens out of the way to grab the last blouse in my size."

All those years, I think she knew we were watching.