

Stardom and the Hungry Public

MY GENERATION DOES NOT KNOW Julia Child. To those of us just some years out of college, in first or second jobs, first cars or first kitchens, Julia's legacy is secondhand. We have our own culinary celebrities, stars of the small screen or the lifestyle magazine, and there is a great difference between my childhood past and the culinary future. My family rarely watched Julia's classic television program, *The French Chef*, but her cookbooks lined our shelves, and it was her style of cooking—and, crucially, her way of making the kitchen the center of social life—that shaped my sense of what it means to eat well. Julia Child was a wildly different kind of celebrity chef from those who now seem, to their fans, to epitomize skill with cutting board or skillet. To their detractors, of course, these chefs can seem nothing more than salespeople pushing new lines of bottled sauces or cookware.

The story of what has happened to culinary celebrity since Julia's heyday is complicated by the transformation of the American media and American tastes. Julia's kitchen with its pegboard and pots now sits in a museum, a celebration of her influence but also a reminder that her moment of influence has passed. We have seen the advent of cable television, and the relaxation of immigration laws has led to a proliferation of ethnic restaurants. Too much has changed since *The French Chef* first aired in 1963 to compare Julia with any of the chefs of cable TV's Food Network, though each seems inspired by her example.

A gap of twenty-one years separated the publication of Julia's influential *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961) and Martha Stewart's *Entertaining* (1982). Calvin Trillin describes the sea change in American eating between the 1960s and 1990s, emphasizing the importance of economic issues, which are often overlooked:

The shake-up of American society that began in the late sixties had thrown some middle-class young people into close proximity with ingredients that were not surrounded by a can; some of these young people came to the realization that there was not, as it turned out, a natural law prohibiting the son of a tax lawyer from becoming a chef.¹

The food industry became a valid career choice for the middle classes; perhaps more important, sophisticated eating was suddenly a marker of one's arrival on the cosmopolitan scene. Having good taste in food was akin to knowing music, or art.² The new chefs Trillin describes introduced unusual ingredients, asserted the legitimacy of local American cuisine, and gave us confidence that the "exotic" dishes of Europe could be prepared at home. Julia was in the forefront, blazing a trail for new appreciations of good food as the centerpiece of social life. She also promoted a new view of the chef as a figure of cultural authority. What, then, distinguishes Julia's celebrity from that of the TV celebrity chefs who inherited her legacy—Emeril Lagasse, Mario Batali, Rachael Ray, and Martha Stewart? I want to know what we have gained by investing certain chefs not merely with authority but with fame.

I know where the payoff was for Julia's fans, or at least I know what my older friends have told me. Julia gave lessons in the enjoyment of a well-prepared meal; she made viewers feel that it was almost as legitimate to know cuisine as it was to know other forms of art. I am less certain about where pleasure is located for Martha Stewart's audience. Is it in the food itself, the knowledge that everything is made by hand, or is it perhaps simply the performance that impresses guests? And if we take pleasure in seeing other people's expressions of pleasure and surprise, do we please them only in order to please ourselves? Julia's recipes were complicated, pages long, but Martha shifts the complexity to include the level of presentation and understands food as image in a way that Julia never did—Martha's business is, after all, more than half interior design, a feature that sets her apart from other television chefs. While Martha's pursuit of a meal in which every element is made from scratch contains a certain attractive resistance both to the cheapening of everyday labor and to corporate America's desire to manufacture everything for us, it also contains a moralizing "ought" that offsets those virtues. For Martha, every effort that can be taken *must* be taken, until more calories are expended in producing a



meal than are gained in the eating. For Martha, in stark contrast to Julia, food as the site of perfection and performance seems to trump food as the site of pleasure.

Culinary celebrities are loved and hated for different reasons than rock musicians or movie stars are, as we rarely turn to actors or musicians for expertise on situations we encounter in our own lives. Imagine listening closely to Tom Waits's lyrics for advice on relationships, or watching Woody Allen's films to find a good shrink on the Upper West Side. Chefs, like famous designers or architects, complicate matters by having something to teach us, and their position touches off a basic anxiety about authority rooted in expertise. It is one thing to set someone on a pedestal, something entirely different to let that person stand above us in the kitchen, potentially criticizing our poor knife technique. We resent our experts for having something to teach us: here, the American fear of cultural elitism wrestles with the American desire to be part of that elite. The public trial of Martha Stewart can, perhaps, be taken as a kind of community theater where we stage the need to humiliate the symbol of a perfection we cannot possess, a perfection that may not really exist.

Julia avoided many of the trappings of stardom and thereby avoided character assassination as well. Not an entrepreneur like Martha, Julia established no media empire, even refusing to move from public television to a commercial network when an offer was made in the early 1960s. This may be why there is only affection, not nastiness, in the endless comedy around Julia's person, in the impressions we do of her unique voice or body language: she never crossed the invisible line from acceptable to unacceptable levels of success. That unique voice, that height, those mannerisms, all served to make her less threatening, to humanize her; one wanted to learn from Julia, not to possess the things she seemed to possess, not to *be* her.

While Julia moved in elite New England circles, one can see in her work an egalitarian streak. She published her *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* the same year that Kennedy brought a French chef into the White House, and her work did much to render accessible the techniques of what was then an intimidating and predominantly male cuisine, bringing it from circles of power to the family circle. This approach does not necessarily divide her from Martha Stewart and the Food Network, who also work toward the same kind of egalitarian access to distinction that Julia came to symbolize. The difference lies in their demand that we thank them, praise them, for sharing insider information.

Julia's *The French Chef* was not the first cooking show on American television—that honor belongs to an enterprise of James Beard's, launched in 1946—but it was the first to become widely influential. Subsequent shows, which can legitimately be called Julia's children, take from it a crucial element of Julia's contribution to the culture of cooking programs and food magazines: the recipe comes first, the ingredients second. The often-remarked-upon dichotomy on this question of priorities between Julia and her 1960s contemporary Elizabeth David is important. Elizabeth David's belief in local ingredients and seasonal cooking, which Alice Waters has made into *the* world-historical principle of California cuisine, was the "other direction" made available to American cookery. Significantly, the Food Network celebrities give us a Julia-inspired approach. Recipes come first, the finished product privileged over our relationship with the growers and the dealers. In a sense, however, many of these shows are the children of Martha Stewart as well, because they put the principle of lifestyle even before that of recipe. These chefs are focused on the performative moment when a dish arrives before expectant guests, and that moment of performance completely determines the chain of production required to make it possible. Chilean agriculture can make your clementine wishes or mango dreams come true—to hell with the havoc that shipping plays on the environment, not to mention on taste. These shows represent fantasies not just about cooking but also about pleasures of performance that have more Martha than Julia about them.

These thoughts lead me to wonder how Julia would fare in the media world she helped to create. Julia was a crucial part of the "cool-making" of food in America, but Julia is not herself cool by the standards of contemporary popular culture. For many in my generation, watching episodes of *The French Chef* would be, at best, an exercise in camp. Despite the huge change that Julia helped bring about, in the eyes of my generation she is a solidly establishment figure who stands for butter and classic French sauces. By contrast, the chefs who ride the Food Network to stardom are young and willing to present themselves as cooking not primarily to teach but to entertain. Returning to our fear of authority, we might say that performance provides another means by which expertise can be made inoffensive.

The influence of Emeril Lagasse, the grill artist Bobby Flay, and the Vespa-riding Jamie Oliver cannot be underestimated; charisma is at least half of what their shows lay on the table. And Mario Batali, who has a chain of restaurants and at least two television programs, was profiled in the *New Yorker* with attention lavished on the delinquencies of

Left: Julia receiving an Emmy award, 1967.

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his past. Evidently there is no such thing as bad publicity, a fact celebrated by the equally well-known star Anthony Bourdain, who casts himself as a culinary and sexual rogue in his autobiographical works. Each of these chefs offers us the kitchen as a site of *play*, which divides them from Martha, whose enjoyment comes not from play but from effort. Then there's Rachael Ray, host of the program *30 Minute Meals*, who has become a niche-market sex symbol, with flesh-baring photo shoots that remind us that her audience has asked for more than recipes. As a general public, we ask for and receive more access to chefs than Julia Child ever gave. We need Martha's performance of perfection, but we also need her feet of clay, and we enjoy a good jeer at her human failings and moral lapses.

The bizarre dialectic of worship and *schadenfreude*, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, that characterizes our response to Martha Stewart and her Omnimedia empire is present in Martha's own work. Her magazine depicts the fruits of our labors with glue gun and X-acto knife (the magic of marbleizing! A better *banquette!*), but it provides few images of people enjoying those fruits. Hers is a strange, hyper-Calvinist world in which our current efforts are always a sign of our basic goodness, our predestination for paradise. Constantly making and remaking, a totally devoted follower of Martha would never allow her muscles to relax, too pre-occupied with making the moment perfect ever to inhabit that moment. We may be impressed by Martha's work, but we never feel intimate with her. Finally, as many have pointed out, the implication that it is always A Good Thing, a Better Thing, to make everything by hand, should strike every working homemaker as an attempt to inculcate feelings of inadequacy. If women are the working homemakers, one feminist complaint runs, doesn't Martha's lifestyle potentially sacrifice years of hard-won political gains?

But what if the story of Julia and Martha isn't a morality tale at all? What if it contains no inner message about the decline of American culture? What if, instead, each of them serves a very different function in our constellation of celebrities, making them both indispensable? It seems

highly instructive that one of the most widely circulated stories about Julia is *The Dropping of the Chicken*. During the filming of one episode of *The French Chef*, the story goes, the bird slides out of the pan and onto the kitchen floor. Julia turns to the camera and says, "No-one's there to see you!" and then scoops up the wayward creature as though nothing had happened. This story reflects the way people look to Julia for a certain conspiratorial cheer and reassurance that despite the fancy French vocabulary, cooking and entertaining can be fun.

Julia never lacked polish, but her idiosyncrasies kept her from developing a threatening perfection, and she was one of those natural performers who do not seem to be performing. Her skillet was just a skillet, not a stage magician's wand. The same surely cannot be said for the star chefs of the Food Network, who bend over backwards to make us laugh, to impress us, to get us to tune into their programs again. We love the culture of gourmet distinction that they make available to us but grow angry with them in time. It was, perhaps, Julia's good fortune that my generation has known her only through anecdote and reputation, and that she was never subject to our appetite for fame. She escaped our destructive relationship with the trope of celebrity, and thus our current reception of her work can be affectionate rather than cynical. Although there may be a dimension of camp in *The French Chef* to some contemporary eyes, Julia represents a welcome refuge from the public theater of scandal. ●

NOTES

1. Calvin Trillin, introduction to *The Tummy Trilogy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), x.
2. Against Trillin's emphasis on the sea change occurring in the 1960s, it is useful to consider Laura Shapiro's *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (New York: Viking, 2004), in which she argues that the change really began with the general increase in prosperity and free leisure time after World War II and thus could be better located in the 1950s.