

Go to a Section  Site Search:  [NYTimes.com](#) > [Dining & Wine](#)

## Julia Child, 91, Dies; She Entertained as She Taught Cooking

By REGINA SCHRAMBLING

Published: August 13, 2004

Julia Child, who mastered the art of French cooking well enough to turn it into prime-time entertainment and who by introducing cassoulet to a casserole culture elevated both American food and television, died today at her home in Santa Barbara, Calif. She would have been 92 on Sunday.

She had been suffering from kidney failure, said a niece, Philadelphia Cousins.

As a cookbook author first and public television star second, Mrs. Child was a towering figure on the culinary front for more than 40 years. Most Americans knew her as the unflappable "French Chef," a tall and twinkly character who in demonstrating classic dishes could make lobster bisque look as easy as toast. But she was also a rarity in a profession characterized by savage backbiting: she was respected as much by her most judgmental peers as by amateurs who would not know a souffl e from a cupcake.

Mrs. Child was not the first dedicated cook to turn cooking into a spectator sport - James Beard preceded her on television in 1945, Dione Lucas in 1948 - but she was the first to understand the seductiveness of a breezy approach to daunting material. Her up-the-scales signature signoff, "bon appetit!" was the first French phrase many Americans ever learned to utter with confidence, much as they came to glorify stew as boeuf bourguignon. She admitted she was "a natural ham," and it was clear that she not only loved the camera but was almost intimate with it.

Mrs. Child, whose "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" has been through numerous editions, was a pop icon virtually from her debut on WGBH in Boston in 1963. She got her start in television at 50, an age youth-crazed producers today would consider well past her sell-by date, and made the cover of Time magazine five years later. Over the decades she was a favorite of comedians, most famously Dan Aykroyd on "Saturday Night Live," who played her boozily bleeding to death while shrieking, "Save the liver." Jean Stapleton even portrayed her in a musical with sung recipes called "Bon Appetit!" in 1989.

But Mrs. Child had more serious cultural side. She was the first public television personality to win an Emmy and also held a George Foster Peabody Award; her other accolades were as disparate as a National Book Award and the Legion d'Honneur from the French government. When she moved from her longtime home in Cambridge, Mass., to a retirement center in her home state of California, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington took her famous kitchen: whisks, stockpots and 800 knives.

For all her expertise at the stove, what made Mrs. Child such an influential teacher was her good-humored insistence that cooking was not brain surgery. If you drop the turkey on the floor, she would say, "You're alone in your kitchen." Just pick it up and go on with the dressing. Unlike so many of the "Naked" and the "bam!" television chefs today, though, she always put the food before the showmanship. She had real respect for recipes, and by example she made cooking a respectable profession, for women as well as men.

Mrs. Child also consistently refused to cut her cuisine to fit the current fashion. At the height of the reign of nutrition terror, in the 80's and 90's, when reliable health information seemed to have the shelf life of a baguette, she repeated one mantra: "If you're afraid of butter, use cream." Long before anyone ever put the words French and paradox together, she was advocating red wine and cheese, and the more the better.

Her career was also marked by an integrity not often on display in a business in which loyalty to products lasts only as long as the endorsement dollars. Mrs. Child was always a star, never a spokesman. She prided herself on not granting endorsements, because she was "devoted to public television," and she was not afraid to mock sponsors of her advertising-free programs. She once demonstrated how to break off a part on a Cuisinart to make it less cumbersome to use even as the manufacturer's

[Enlarge This Image](#)

Jared Leeds for The New York Times  
The television chef, who taught millions to cook, was 91 years old.

### ARTICLE TOOLS

-  [E-Mail This Article](#)
-  [Printer-Friendly Format](#)
-  [Most E-Mailed Articles](#)
-  [Reprints & Permissions](#)

### READERS' OPINIONS

- [Forum: Join a Discussion on Remembering Julia Child](#)

### TIMES NEWS TRACKER

Topics	Alerts
<a href="#">Create Your Own</a>	<a href="#">Manage</a>
<a href="#">Most Popular Alerts</a>	<a href="#">Take a Tour</a>
<a href="#">CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE</a> 	

representatives sat in the audience. And she was known to sue to prevent a restaurant from advertising that it was one of her favorites.

Although she came late to the table, never even attempting to cook before she married at 34, Mrs. Child had no hesitation at adopting the French way of eating, in the case of a pig, every part but the squeal. Her fearlessness made great television: she roasted ducks, sautéed sweetbreads and stuffed sausages into casings with grunts of effort. She stayed with WGBH even after her series became a national success because it gave her the freedom to cook tripe, kidneys and other offal that she said would not fry on commercial television.

Mrs. Child, who was as slim as she was tall, was also French in her insistence on moderation. "People are afraid of French food because of all the cream and butter," she said. "But you don't see all those big fat people over there that you see lumbering around Disneyland."

While she has been credited with inspiring a boom in French restaurants, an explosion of fancy food markets and even the arrival of the Food Network, she insisted her original book and program benefited from "a concatenation of factors" in the early 1960's. It was an era when Jacqueline Kennedy was raising awareness of all things French, and travel to France, which used to take a week by boat, was shortened to mere hours by plane. Duncan Hines cake mixes and Jell-O "salads" may have been far more prevalent than chocolate mousse and vinaigrette, but Americans were ready to embrace French food, at least as it was translated by a charismatic compatriot.

Mrs. Child wrote her masterwork over the better part of a decade in collaboration with Simone Beck and Louise Bertholle, her partners in a cooking school they called L'Ecole de Trois Gourmandes in Paris. They were so bent on producing home-style French cooking at its most rigid and exacting that they included recipes like pressed duck, which required a special machine. Not surprisingly, the manuscript was rejected by Houghton-Mifflin, the publisher that had originally contracted for it. Judith Jones at Alfred A. Knopf read a later, more comprehensive version and decided it was the detailed, lucid, approachable French cookbook that she, and all of America, had been waiting for.

The introduction is Mrs. Child at her most direct: "This is a book for the servantless American cook who can be unconcerned on occasion with budgets, waistlines, time schedules, children's meals, the parent-chauffeur-den mother syndrome, or anything else which might interfere with the enjoyment of producing something wonderful to eat." The book, she wrote, "could well be titled 'French Cooking from the American Supermarket.'"

As revolutionary as the book was, it might have only gathered cobwebs in bookstores alongside Escoffier's Guide Culinaire if not for Mrs. Child's way with a whisk on camera. Invited onto a book review program on WGBH to talk about "Mastering," she chose to whip up an omelet, beating the eggs in a giant copper bowl. Russell Morash, who became her producer, recalled the sight: "I thought to myself: 'Who is this madwoman?'"

Viewers were so taken with the frenzy of cooking and relaxed chatter that she was hired to put together 26 segments, for \$50 apiece. Stations in Pittsburgh, San Francisco, then New York picked the series up, she said, "and we was made." With help from her multitalented husband, Paul, she appeared on a set replicating a home kitchen and cooked the dishes of the week, then served them to herself, complete with wine. "The French Chef" became the longest-running program in the history of public television; it was followed by "Julia Child & Company," "Dinner With Julia" and other series. One critic, John J. O'Connor in the New York Times, described Mrs. Child as "one of the few relentlessly real people on television."

The unlikely star whipped through quenelles and coquilles St. Jacques with the greatest of ease, moving on smoothly even after dropping pots or announcing she was about to put a gratin in the refrigerator instead of in the oven where it belonged. Years later, she explained her insouciance by saying she had demonstrated those same dishes many times at her school in France, whose logo she wore on her signature blue shirt, and she had the technique down cold.

All her programs were distilled to what she called fundamental lessons. In browning meat, it was as simple as "hot oil, dry meat and don't crowd the pan." She would cook chicken fricassée and coq au vin side by side to show that they were essentially the same dish, one made with white wine, the other with red. She advised viewers to "plunge right in" in boning a chicken and to "have the courage of your convictions" in flipping a potato pancake. No one ever had to send away for a printed recipe after watching one of her segments.

When she wrote recipes, they were long and detailed because, she said, she felt obligated to insure their success. "A cookbook is only as good as its worst recipe," she said. All 10 of her cookbooks were held up as models of clarity. She was also adamant that cooking was not like free-form jazz: she intended her recipes to be followed to the letter. The one bane of her high-profile career, she once said, was too much mail, especially any letter "from some stupid woman."

Mrs. Child also knew the distinction between chef (skilled overseer of a restaurant kitchen) and cook (herself). The program was titled "The French Chef" only "so it would fit in TV Guide on one line," she said, adding: "I always hoped we'd get one."

Julia Carolyn McWilliams was born Aug. 15, 1912, in Pasadena, Calif. Her father was a wealthy farm consultant and investor; her mother was a housewife with a cook and maid who could make not much more than baking powder biscuits, codfish balls and Welsh rarebit. Julia was the oldest of three siblings, each so tall that their mother boasted that she had given birth to "18 feet of children." Otherwise, she gave no indication that she would lead an outside life.

She attended Smith College at a time when "women could be either nurses or teachers," she said, and she "had some vague idea of being a novelist or a basketball star." After graduation in 1934 and a stint as a copywriter in between cocktail parties in New York, she returned home, on the way to becoming a slacker decades ahead of her time. According to her biographer, Noel Riley Fitch, in "Appetite for Life" (Doubleday, 1997), her one real job in her hometown, in advertising and public relations, ended when she was fired for insubordination, and rightly so, she always said.

After World War II broke out, she had fantasies of becoming a spy and signed up for intelligence work with the Office of Strategic Services and was sent off as a file clerk to Ceylon. There she met Paul Child, the head of a chart-making division who was 10 years older and several inches shorter. He was also an artist, a poet and a serious food lover who opened up her taste horizons on their travels in China.

They married in 1946 and spent a year in Washington before Mr. Child was sent to Paris by the United States Information Agency. It was a fateful move, because Mrs. Child by then was struggling to learn to cook and her husband was suffering the consequences. French food immediately took her attempts to a higher plane. Out of those early experiments came her core belief, that cooking was an art to be studied, not picked up on the fly.

She threw herself into studies at the Cordon Bleu and later joined the Cercle des Gourmets, a club where she met Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle.

In 1956, after postings in Marseille, Norway and Germany, the Childs bought a five-bedroom house in Cambridge, drawn to the intellectual stimulation of a university town. They continued to visit Europe frequently, maintaining a home near Grasse, in the south of France.

Over the years, Mrs. Child devoted herself to her television series while writing companion cookbooks, ending with "Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home," in collaboration with Jacques Pepin, in 1999. For the first books, she would test her recipes upstairs in the open kitchen in Cambridge, outfitted with a Garland range, while her husband painted in a studio in the basement. When she called, he would come up to photograph her latest creation to give the illustrator something to draw on.

As Mrs. Child aged, her role in more and more programs was to sit by as other cooks did the *saut e*. But her star power was undiminished: on "Julia Child & Company" she made Emeril Lagasse look like a mild-mannered professional. She also had a regular gig on "Good Morning America" on ABC in the 1980s.

Mrs. Child was a breast cancer survivor, a cat lover, a fervent advocate of Planned Parenthood and an unabashed sensualist with a sly sense of humor. One year she and her husband sent out Valentine's cards with a photograph of them together in the bathtub in Paris. One of her last projects was to be a memoir of her years in France.

She always refused to speak evil of fast food but admitted she could live without Mexican cuisine. Overall, she said, she preferred "la cuisine soign e: long, caring cooking." Asked what her favorite meal was, she might mention duck or leg of lamb but would almost always add: "I love good, fresh food cooked by someone who knows what he's doing."

Mrs. Child's obsession with promoting the culinary arts as a profession led to her becoming the first woman inducted into the Culinary Institute of America's hall of fame. She helped establish the American Institute of Wine and Food and, later, Copia: the American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts in California. In 1986, after the death of her friend James Beard, she led the effort to buy his townhouse in Greenwich Village and convert it into a nonprofit foundation.

She was also active in the International Association of Culinary Professionals. For her 90th birthday, 20 restaurants across the country staged dinners in her honor to raise money for the group for culinary research in France. Along with lending her kitchen to the Smithsonian, she contributed her huge cookbook collection to the Schlesinger Library at Harvard.

Paul Child died 1994 after a long hospitalization. Julia Child is survived by a sister, Dorothy Cousins, of Mill Valley, Calif., and several nieces and nephews.

To the end, Mrs. Child maintained her image as the ultimate *bon vivant*, a California girl with easy French tastes. Whenever she was asked what her guilty pleasures were, she responded: "I don't have any guilt."

Despite decades of rumors about her suspiciously relaxed condition on the set, though, she always denied a one-bottle-for-me, one-for-the-pot pattern of cooking. Her husband, in fact, often said that one of his earliest duties was dyeing water with beef extract so that it could pass for red wine - the producers could afford real Burgundy only for the stew, not for the star's glass.

## RELATED ARTICLES

- [A Race To Master The Art Of French Cooking](#) (August 13, 2003) \$
- [BOLDFACE NAMES](#) (December 3, 2002) \$
- [WELL-BEING; The Body May Creak, but the Brain Hums Along](#) (March 12, 2002) \$

- [FOOD STUFF; This Beefsteak Tomato Has a Lofty Calling](#) (January 2, 2002)

[Find more results for Child, Julia](#)

#### **TOP DINING & WINE ARTICLES**

- [Julia Child, 91, Dies; She Entertained as She Taught Cooking](#)
- [Books of The Times | 'Spice': Delight of Movers and Shakers](#)
- [With a Bit of Love, the Blues Are Just Fine](#)
- [Much of Bordeaux Goes Begging](#)

[Go to Dining & Wine](#)