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## The Julia I Cook With

By JULIE POWELL

**O**n the day Julia Child died, I loused up her Potage Parmentier.

I knew the only fitting celebration of her long life and peaceful death would be a weekend of buttery, creamy, vermouthy excess. Potato leek soup, the first recipe in the first book she ever wrote (with considerable assistance from Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle) seemed an innocuous enough way to ease into the sometimes choppy waters of her inspired kitchen lunacy. It is, as Mrs. Child so reassuringly notes, "simplicity itself to make," just potatoes, leeks and some butter (or if you are afraid of butter, use cream).

I have made this dish countless times, but on Friday night, for the first time, I failed. The soup was watery and bland, exactly the "un-French universal baby pap" Mrs. Child warns against. No proud memorial of a potage, this.

But the Julia I cook with is not only the great teacher who wrote the serenely confident prose of "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" or who bumbled over a boeuf bourguignon on public television, towel tucked efficiently in waistband. She is also a mischievous devil-Julia, who sits on my shoulder, counseling against cowardly forbearance. "Bone that duck! Vivisect that lobster! Go ahead — what could happen?"

So the tears that rolled down my cheek as I poked at my potato gruel were the nostalgic sort, accompanied by Julia Childlike gales of laughter. With a muse like her, both failure and triumph come with the turf — and I thank her for it.

Take French bread, for example. Mrs. Child's infamous 15-page gorilla of a recipe in the terrifying second volume of "Mastering the Art" is, shall we say, daunting — but she blithely assumes I am going to jump right in, so I find that I do.

While kneading is a peaceful sort of a activity, and there is a certain Zen in waiting for the dough to rise, you will need the full "courage of your convictions" that she so believed in when jerking the loaves off your improvised plywood baker's paddle onto a baker's stone you have faked by lining an oven rack with quarry tiles, heating a brick on a gas burner and dropping the superheated thing into a pan of cold water on the oven floor.

Or take sole meunière. This is the first dish she ate in France, if the biography "Appetite for Life" by Noel Riley Fitch (Doubleday, 1997) is to be believed, and it is the work of a few minutes, as long as you do not count the hours my increasingly irritated husband spent pounding the pavement looking for whole Dover sole. Apparently, there was a run on sole all over Manhattan last Saturday, an event which inspires heartwarming visions of a city of cooks simultaneously yanking the skins off flatfish in fond memory of Julia Child.

I have always been particularly dubious of the episode of "Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home" in which Mrs. Child and Jacques Pépin demonstrate this dish. But I'll be a monkey's uncle if it did not work splendidly. Following their example, I relieved the fish of its skin as easily as if it had been attached with a zipper, and squeezed out the pink roe like toothpaste from a tube. After I had sautéed the fish in a sauce of brown butter and capers. I filleted it neatly and lifted out the skeleton in one unlikely, perfect piece. Brushing up on my Julia imitation, I fairly crowed with delight.

Some of the recipes in "Mastering the Art" can seem fusty to younger cooks, if only because our parents followed Mrs. Child's exhortations into a brave new world of bubble tea and hen-of-the-woods mushrooms. Recipes can age gracefully or not. While Mrs. Child's French bread is still sharp as a tack, her Chicken Melon scares the children, and her aspic has lost the spring in its step.

But there is a brave joy peculiar to someone who has found her passion and lives her life in pursuit of it. That joy permeates everything Julia Child touched. Aspics come and go. But her infectious, blissful bravery gives us cooks something more. When hesitating over the notion of making puff pastry from scratch, it is because of Mrs. Child that some of the more insane among us have the courage to answer "What could happen?" with a cheerful chortle, "Why, anything!"

Bloated on the warm, chewy French bread I had used to mop up the last of the brown butter sauce for the sole meunière, I made one more attempt at Potage Parmentier. I diced, I simmered, I thickened with cream. As far as I could tell, I did

everything exactly as I had before.

I'll be a monkey's uncle if it did not turn out just perfect.