Hundreds of articles have been written about Julia Child’s impact on the American culinary scene and on the structure and content of television programming in particular. And rightfully so, since she was the first to present a “how-to” format and popularize cooking as a viable subject. Julia’s no-nonsense approach to cooking and to life in general was part of her alluring charm, and her unpretentious outlook endeared her to thousands of fans, not just the culinary world. Many people feel that they know all about the Queen of Cuisine from the biographical pieces that have appeared, but few realize just how funny Julia Child was.

Julia’s sense of humor was marvelous. She was a master of one-liners. Her timing was impeccable, and the twinkle in her eye would tell you that she relished being a little bit devilish. Her cooking demonstrations were often informal so that everyone would feel comfortable about asking and learning and enjoying every aspect of preparing a meal. Once, at a fundraising event at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Julia instructed the audience to just “call out any questions” as they arose. At one point, an audience member called out, “Shouldn’t you use extra virgin olive oil to sauté that chicken?” “No,” Julia replied, “That should be used as a raw ingredient to finish off a dish or as the base of a salad dressing.” “Why?” asked the woman. “Because,” Julia’s eyes held that telltale sparkle, “everyone knows that a heated virgin just doesn’t work very well!”

Although I have been known to give a one-liner myself, my usual modus operandi is the full-fledged narrative type of joke—even ones that evoke a groan rather than an actual laugh. Every once in a while I would tell a joke that Julia found particularly amusing. Her highest compliment was the very rare occasion when she would repeat my joke as they arose. At one point, an audience member called out, “Shouldn’t you use extra virgin olive oil to sauté that chicken?” “No,” Julia replied, “That should be used as a raw ingredient to finish off a dish or as the base of a salad dressing.” “Why?” asked the woman. “Because,” Julia’s eyes held that telltale sparkle, “everyone knows that a heated virgin just doesn’t work very well!”

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Some facts have just come to light concerning the sinking of the Titanic. One, for example, is that most people don’t know that in 1912 Hellmann’s mayonnaise was manufactured only in England. The ship Titanic was carrying twelve thousand jars of the condiment scheduled for delivery in Vera Cruz, Mexico, which was to be the next port of call of the great ship after New York City. The people of Mexico eagerly awaited the first delivery and were very upset at the news of the sinking. So much so that they declared a national day of mourning, which they still observe today. It is known, of course, as Sinko de Mayo.

Hearing Julia tell the joke made it funny enough to laugh at rather than just groan. And this joke will always be special to me because the first time Julia told it, she gave me credit as her source, along with the comment that “Stephanie tells a lot of jokes. Sometimes she is actually funny.”

It was Julia’s joie de vivre and ability to laugh at herself that made Julia—Julia. She would purposely mispronounce words, saying, for instance, “vi-o-la” instead of “voilà.” And, on more than one occasion, she called out “Save the liver!” in reference to Dan Akroyd’s famous skit. When I first began working with Julia, I asked her what she thought of the Saturday Night Live piece. “It’s very funny, don’t you think?” was her response. I then confessed that I had not actually seen it but had heard that it was quite humorous. Well, Julia then stood up and did Dan Akroyd doing Julia Child. She finished by sprawling herself across her desk and exclaiming, “And then I died!” I must say that as wonderful as Dan’s piece was, Julia doing him doing her was far more amusing.

Julia was unpredictable; you never knew what she would say or do, except of course that you could always count on having a good time. The Maine Audubon Society was hosting a fundraising event; at their request, Julia agreed to demonstrate several ways to prepare Muscovy duck. Julia and I planned a very complicated and elaborate class because we had been told that this was a group of truly serious and well-seasoned culinarians. As we drove to Maine, we talked our way through the battle plan for the demonstration. Julia would prepare four different recipes—two with breast meat and two with leg meat. She would debone half of the duck, but rather than taking the time to debone the other half,
she would then hand the duck to me so that I could finish the deboning while she began her demonstration of what to do with the breast meat. I would then give her the second breast, which she would prepare while I set up for the leg recipes. It was all going to be synchronized like clockwork, and we were confident that everything would run without a hitch. But when we arrived, we quickly realized that most of the audience members had very little cooking experience at all! With only about fifteen minutes before the cooking demonstration was to begin, there wasn’t time to change the choreography. So we began according to plan. Julia carefully explained each step of the deboning process as she deftly worked on half of the duck. Then, instead of handing the remaining part to me, she lifted it up over her head and called out to the audience, “Who gets the door prize?” Nothing was done according to the plan, and no one knew or cared, but a good time was had by all.

Julia did a lot of traveling for fundraising events and also to promote her cookbooks and television shows. Needless to say, she spent a great deal of time in airports. As one would expect, there were often long waits in crowded, uncomfortable settings. She didn’t seem to mind and would simply take advantage of the opportunity to read the paper or a mystery novel. Once, a gentleman in pointy-toed cowboy boots and a large, brown cowboy hat whisked past her as he headed to his gate. He must have caught a glimpse of her in his peripheral vision, because he doubled back to take a better look. Then he continued on his way briefly. Again, he doubled back, took one more look, and called out, “Bone App-pee-TIT, Julia!” She looked up from her newspaper, smiled, and called back, “Bone app-pee-tit to you too!”

On another occasion, while we were waiting for a connecting plane, a sports convention of some type was just ending. A very long line of standby passengers was waiting to see if they could get out of town on our flight, which was much earlier than their scheduled flights. Julia was oblivious to them, but I was intrigued with people watching. As often happened, someone in the crowd thought that he recognized Julia. With a knowing nod and a shift of his eyes from Julia to me and then back to her again, a very attractive man asked without words if that was who he thought it was. I smiled and nodded. After he had finished dealing with the folks at the counter, he approached Julia, introduced himself, and asked her what size shoe she wore. As he walked away, Julia commented on his good looks and said that she hoped he would be sitting near us on the plane. I agreed, but wondered what kind of a foot fetish he had. As it turns out, he was a distributor of sorts, and a few minutes later, he returned with a pair of size 12A black sneakers for Julia. She was thrilled and thanked him. The sound of her voice caused a commotion among the other people waiting for standby seats. They had not noticed the celebrity before, but now, like ants on a Popsicle stick, they were swarming all around—bestowing all kinds of sports gear upon us. I wondered how in the world I was going to be able to carry all of this stuff onto the plane for Julia, and also wondered if she even wanted the plethora of T-shirts, baseball caps, and water-bottle carriers. Before I could ask, she turned to me and said, “I’m glad that I’m not a rock star!” “Why is that?” I asked. “Because they would be tearing my clothes off right now!” She had a good point.

Actually, Julia frequently had a practical, albeit amusing, perspective on things. She loved to go for long drives into unknown neighborhoods just to see what was going on and to take in all of the scenery. I became a little unnerved one day when she asked me to make a turn onto a road that was clearly marked “Private.” I told her that I didn’t think it would be a good idea to go down that turn and suggested that we continue along the mountain road we were on. When she questioned why I was so concerned, I explained that the sign marking the road was big enough that even Helen Keller wouldn’t have missed it. She replied, “What’s the worst that can happen? Someone might stop us, and we will tell them we are looking for Wilma Wolcot and ask them which house is hers!” So down the road we went! It was lovely, and I never would have seen it if I hadn’t been with Julia. Who, by the way, then took a very deep breath and sighed, “It smells like money in these parts.”

What a wonderful and admirable gift Julia gave to everyone, the chance to smile and laugh, to enjoy all that life has to offer! Those of us fortunate enough to have had first-hand experience with Julia’s wit and wisdom are truly lucky. I treasure those memories most because they will always make me smile.●