Julia’s Greatest Lesson
Get On with It!

I might never have met Julia Child if I hadn’t known the proper way to boil an egg. It was 1979 and I was just two years out of cooking school, working as the chef/manager of a catering operation in Cambridge, Mass. One day I was peeling a mountain of hard-boiled eggs with Berit Pratt, one of my workers. The two of us were discussing Julia’s famous no-boil method of egg hard-cookery when Berit let drop that she had been a volunteer on Julia’s television shows. I knew that Julia taped the shows at wgah in Boston and asked Berit if she thought Julia might need another volunteer. Berit said she would find out.

The next day at work Berit said that Julia wanted to hire me. Naturally I was stunned. “She’s never even met me,” I said. “Why would she want to pay me?” Berit calmly replied that she had told Julia all about me and my degree from the cia and that that was enough for Julia. Still incredulous, I scurried down to the pay phone at the corner drugstore. (This was not a call I wanted to make in the middle of the buzzing hive that was the commissary office.) Julia herself picked right up and said, “Oh, dearie, Berit has told me all about you. Do you food style?”

“Yes,” I lied. Of course I was conscious of the importance of the presentation of food on a plate or a platter, but these were the very early days of food styling and I had no formal training and no particular expertise. Still, the chance to work with Julia was just too tempting, so I swallowed hard and told her I was “very good” at food styling. Satisfied, Julia hired me over the phone. It was only later that I found out that the woman who usually did the food styling—Julia’s old friend and associate Rosie Manell—couldn’t join the crew until halfway through the season, so Julia was a tad desperate.

We worked three days a week for three months to tape the show called Julia Child and More Company and to put together the cookbook that went with it. Besides Julia and the camera crew, there were about fifteen of us on the project. We developed the recipes as we went along. I’d imagined that working with Julia would be a matter of sitting at the feet of a master and learning my lessons, but that was not her way. Julia wanted to know what we thought at every step of the process. Although she did indeed generate most of the ideas, we all together powwowed about the best way to make that gateau of crêpes or bombe au chocolat. It was not unusual for us to test a recipe fifteen times or more before we got it right—and it was Julia, the perfectionist, who told us when it was right.

Organizationally, you could say that we were a team and that Julia was the coach, but otherwise no one was assigned a position. This lack of hierarchy eventually led to friction among the troops, and we urged Julia to define the jobs that each of us was expected to do. In her kindly, democratic way, Julia pretended that we were all chiefs and no Indians and proceeded to give everyone an executive title. (I was suddenly the show’s executive associate.) On paper it might have seemed like a recipe for continued confusion, but in fact the pecking order became clear, and we began to get along better than we had before.

One of the great things about working with Julia on More Company was that we always stopped for lunch—and I’m not talking about take-out sandwiches on paper plates. Temi Hyde, one of our volunteers (and a very elegant lady), would dress a long table with a tablecloth, china, and flatware. Lunch began with un petit apéritif—perhaps Julia’s beloved vermouth—and we’d go on to drink wine with the meal. We ate our own food, either the outtakes of the recipes we’d been making for the show or a quick composed salad with all the bits and pieces of food kicking around the kitchen. Julia’s spirits rose as we dined, and she’d invariably exclaim, “Isn’t this fun!” And it was...although there’s no denying our work tended to go rather more slowly in the afternoons. I understand that in later series wine was no longer served during staff lunch.

Of course, Julia’s high spirits were a crucial ingredient in her success on television...even if behind the scenes we
sometimes wished they weren’t quite so high. Making
French onion soup one day, Julia decided that the French
bread procured to accompany the soup was unworthy, so
she blithely flung it behind her. No question it was great
TV,
but onstage Marian Morash and I watched, frozen in horror,
as the loaf sailed just over the top of tray after tray of
prepped food, landing in a corner wrapped around a bottle
of red wine. During the bread’s flight Marian and I both
had stopped breathing. Julia’s grand gesture could have cost
us a whole day’s work in a single stroke. We never did tell
her about the near disaster.

When I started working with Julia, I was pleased to think
that my formal training was behind me. The CIA had provided
me with a great education, but it was no picnic. In retrospect
it seems perfectly appropriate that the school is housed in
an old monastery and run like a military academy. If you are
not dressed properly in whites, hair completely tucked under
hat, all jewelry removed, nails trimmed, you get points off
your grade for that day. Miss a class and it’s more points off
your grade—and who cares if you’re running a temperature
of 104? After all, you’re training for a career in the restaurant
industry. And things were even tougher then if you were
one of the relatively few women on the campus. Most of the
chefs were European men. As a group, they were not delighted
to find women in their classrooms. In fact, I thrived there,
but I was not sorry to say good-bye.

So when Julia suggested that I needed to go to France to
get some more training, I was pretty disheartened. While I
dithered, Julia acted. One day an old French chef friend of
Julia’s visited the set, and she went right ahead and asked him
if he would offer me an apprenticeship. He said, yes, he’d be
delighted. I didn’t notice the gleam in his eye. Finished with
More Company, I took a leave of absence from my day job
and headed off to France. I worked for two months at this
chef’s one-star restaurant in Chartres and learned a ton—
despite the fact that the chef refused to let me work the line
and chased me around the wine cellar whenever he got a
chance. Forget the fact that I was no more to this old goat
than a tender young lamb. The really maddening aspect of
this farce was that he was a dear old friend of my mentor and
that I was working every day alongside his wife and daugh-
ters. It was horrifying. There was no one to confide in.

Six months after I got back home, I worked up the
courage to tell Julia about it. Her reply? “Oh, dearie, what
did you expect? They’re all like that. Get over it!” At the time
I thought that was a fairly shocking and unsisterly thing for
Julia to say, but I think now that she was right on the money.
Men will be men, and it’s naïve for a woman to expect any-
thing different. The savvy woman anticipates these goofy
roadblocks and figures out how to motor around them. The
key thing is not to get derailed. In fact, the more I think
about it, it was the greatest lesson Julia ever taught me.