La Bella Julia

"Julia changed my life," I announced dramatically to a group of foodies assembled at a Boston University lecture, hoping to break into their conversation. "And she did so even before I ever met her..."

I later realized how close that pronunciamento was to the truth. Early in 1955 WGBH-TV, Boston, had hired me for several months before its official opening, as a consultant for the Channel 2 film section. I soon joined the station's staff as director of the film section, which consisted of a small Arriflex camera and me. But after six years I felt the lure of Italy, so I left Channel 2 for Rome, where I worked as a freelance filmmaker. Every few years my wife, Margaret, and I would return to Boston and invite the old 'GBH friends over (by now they were all part of the station's elite) to exchange a few laughs and news of our lives. My big news was that I now had four children and had kept filming around the world, winning kudos but not making a dime. WGBH, meanwhile, had several shows that had gone national. One in particular was a smashing success: The French Chef.

"De Gaulle?" I asked. It was impossible for me to associate TV with cooking. No, my friends said, Julia Child, a marvelous lady who single-handedly, in just a few years, has changed America's attitude toward food. Before Julia we ate because we had to; now we eat because we enjoy it. Her program was so successful that WGBH had branched out with Joyce Chen's Chinese food show, and a program about Greek food was now on the drawing board.

With a family to feed, I was looking for work. I boldly announced that WGBH had overlooked the mother of all cuisines and suggested that they do a show on Italian cooking, which Margaret and I would write and produce. My friends agreed, but only on the condition that Margaret and I be the cooks. On stage! We were to do no more and no less than what we did when we had friends for dinner: the two of us chatting and cooking and serving guests in the kitchen, right from the stove, at our huge monastery table. The real Romagnolis’ Table.

Our first shows were taped in Julia's studio, and we used her stove. When we finally met her, Margaret and I found Julia much more imposing in real life than on the screen. She graciously gave us pointers about the stove's quirks—which burner misbehaved and which didn’t—and about TV cooking in general. "Audiences abhor silences," she warned, "so whatever you do, keep talking!" Easy for her, and for Margaret, but quite a test for me. The studio stove had been built to conform to Julia's height; for us, a three-inch platform had to be built behind it. So there we were, a filmmaker and his journalist wife, turned quite suddenly into TV chefs. And all thanks to Julia.

Over the next few years we saw Julia on and off at official dinners or at friends' get-togethers. I was lucky to be her table companion on frequent occasions, when I could enjoy at close range her humor and often racy jokes. Julia would underline the punch lines with a vigorous slap on my arm or my thigh; afterwards, I wore the black-and-blue spots like medals.

Made bold by her friendliness, we invited her and Paul to dinner a few times. The first time we prepared a fabulous five-course Roman dinner, scouring all the Italian neighborhoods for the perfect ingredients. Unfortunately, we found out too late (by Julia's admission) that Italian was her least favorite cuisine. Paul, however, loved Italian food, having served in his youth as tutor to the scion of a rich Veronese family. The next few times we prepared dishes out of Julia's own cookbooks and won raves.

Once the TV tapings were over, some well-heeled friends (who became investors) encouraged us to open a restaurant. With more than a touch of daring, we did, although Julia, in a big-sisterly way, advised us against it. (She had no financial worries, while we were quite a long way from that, with a large family to take care of.) With a master touch of originality, we named the restaurant The Romagnolis Table. Modesty aside, for ten years our restaurant was an absolute success. From time to time, Julia would come to dinner unannounced. She made positive comments on our wine list, even though it was exclusively Italian. Paul liked the list, especially Amarone, a rich Veronese red.
In our kitchen worked twelve talented, sometimes quirky people. One of them, a handsome young girl named Fonzie, was exceptionally tall. A talented opera singer, she rounded up her income by prepping in the kitchen, where her constant jokes and mischief softened the often tense atmosphere.

One Halloween day, with the manager’s permission but unbeknownst to me, Fonzie came to work dressed as a clown, complete with scare wig and red-ball nose. That also happened to be the day when Julia was having dinner at the restaurant, and she asked if she could have a look at our kitchen. I warned her not to be surprised by the chaos and noise at this peak hour, but she assured me she was familiar with busy restaurant kitchens. As we entered the doorway, we caught sight of a performance that chilled my blood: there, in the middle of the kitchen, stood a tall clown, spanking a chicken breast that had been sent back by a dissatisfied customer.

“Take that!” Fonzie was yelling, perfectly imitating Julia’s voice. “And (spank) that! You bad (spank), bad chicken!” Everyone in the kitchen froze, silent. Fonzie turned to find the real Julia in her audience. She slowly liquefied under the prep counter; I used the doorframe to keep me upright.

“Bravo! Bravo!” Julia yelled, applauding; and smiling, she left the kitchen.

That, I thought when they scraped me off the door, is one generous lady. Fonzie later sent a note of apology to Julia, which Julia graciously answered. I know, because Fonzie proudly showed me Julia’s autographed card.

In 1989 we decided to close the restaurant while the going was good. Among the few cards we received, one was from Santa Barbara. “I hear you closed The Table. Congratulations, now you are free! I shall be in Cambridge soon, see you then. Julia.”

In September 1995, after a blessedly short illness, Margaret left us. At the memorial mass, Julia sat near me; though she did not say a word, her presence was consoling. After the reception, I walked Julia to her car. “What now?” she asked me.

“I really do not know,” I replied. “Come October, we had plans to tour the country. Go south, then west, perhaps back by way of Canada….I will surely not do it now, nor later….not alone.” Julia thought for a second. Then, in that older and wiser sisterly tone she said: “You know, if you spread the word, a lot of young ladies will volunteer to accompany you.” She stopped, then added after a pause: “And you know, you will not need to marry them, either.”

I still regret that I did not ask her on the spot to accompany me. ☺