One evening in Cambridge, when Julia was well along in her eighties, she sat down to a late supper after a hard day of shooting a TV segment and working on the accompanying book and lifted her glass to us all. “Don’t we have fun!” she exclaimed. “And we never stop learning.”

I think that remark epitomizes Julia’s strength as a writer, a teacher, and an endlessly curious cook. She was driven by a sense of mission—to arouse in her fellow Americans the pleasure one gets in cooking well—and she was determined to give us the tools to do so. That meant distilling the exacting vocabulary of French classic cookery, the backbone of Western cuisine, to give us the building blocks to cook creatively and successfully. It took tremendous determination and energy to take on such a challenge, and she was blessed with both.

Julia was also empowered by her husband, Paul, who had a highly analytical mind and a fine, educated palate. Always at the ready with his camera and willing to do any chore, he was a true partner who both supported and challenged Julia in her ambitious venture. When I first met Julia after months of correspondence (she and Paul were still in Europe while we were working on what became Mastering the Art of French Cooking), Paul escorted her to my office and took careful notes. Later, when I would go up for several days of work sessions to Cambridge, where they had settled, I would often hear him say to her, “Submit it to the test, Julie.”

I remember a good example of how Julia heeded that admonition. I had asked her if she could give us a recipe for homemade sausage to substitute for the saucisson de Toulouse, so essential to a good cassoulet and virtually unobtainable in those days. On the wall of the kitchen she had posted a large chart labeled “Garlic Sausage,” citing old French charcuterie sources followed by her test results; the final column was devoted to her own formulas with a critical analysis of each effort. So that’s how she arrived at the perfect cassoulet sausage. “Almost as easy as making a hamburger,” she exclaimed. Well, maybe—after she had done all the hard work.

Those work sessions in Julia’s kitchen were labor intensive, to say the least, and I always learned something new. Once, when I had not understood her manuscript instructions for making puff pastry, Julia put it to the test by having me perform. “Just try it out, dearie,” she said and handed me her giant-size rolling pin and stood me in front of her pastry marble. As I struggled to spread the cold butter on the dough, she watched my every move, fine-tuning her instructions where I faltered. Paul was there, too, up on a ladder photographing the tricky parts so that the illustrator could zero in on the essential details. He also made diagrams to demonstrate how the rolling and folding produced seventy-two layers of butter. It was Paul’s novel idea, incidentally, to always shoot from on high over Julia’s shoulder so that what we would see illustrated on the page was exactly how we would be doing it—not a mirror image that had to be translated.

Often we worked so hard all day that we hardly stopped for lunch—maybe just threw together a tuna fish sandwich or corned beef hash straight from the can (even then, though, I learned an important truc from Julia: add a little stock when cooking the hash to give it a nice glaze). Finally, at ten or even eleven in the evening, Julia would sweep everything aside and declare, “Time for dinner.” Paul would set the table and make the cocktails, I’d be asked to
make a nice little potato dish or a salad, Julia would whip up a delicious main course, and in no time we would be sitting at the kitchen table enjoying a soigné (to use one of her favorite words) dinner with a good bottle of wine from Paul’s cellar. Well after midnight we’d fall into our beds, and then at six the next morning, I would be awakened by the thump-thump-thump on the floor of Julia and Paul doing their morning exercises.

By now the story is well known of how Julia packed up and took to France American flour, American yeast, and American salt and sought out the great bread teacher Professor Clavel, so she could learn how to make a real French baguette with our ingredients. But what prompted her was the months of work Paul had put into trying to develop a workable recipe, which had met with dismal failure. I had made the suggestion that a baguette was such an integral part of a French meal—and, again, it was not something you could easily get in those days—that we really should have a recipe in volume two of *Mastering*. But Julia was so busy testing suckling pigs and *boudin blanc* and arguing with Simca (Simone Beck) about the right way to prepare *confit d’oie* that she didn’t have time to give it her full attention. So she assigned the task to Paul, who, she said, used to make bread in college. Poor Paul. I think he produced over sixty loaves, some of which he mailed to me in New York, and they all looked the sad twisted limbs of a gnarled olive tree. So he gave up. But it was his groundwork that led Julia to the *professeur* to unearth the secrets—the long, slow rising of the dough, the careful shaping of the loaves, the simulation of a baker’s oven by preheating bricks or a stone baking sheet, and the creation of steam for a crust. The resulting eleven-page recipe was an example of the kind of carefully spelled-out instruction that Julia developed to an art.
In the introduction to the first book, Julia had written: “Anyone can cook anything with the right instruction.” I remember that in the recipe for making an omelet she suggested that “a simple-minded but perfect way to master the movement (the jerking of the pan that makes the omelet flip over) is to practice outdoors with a cupful of dried beans.” I was living at the time in a penthouse apartment that had a terrace, so I practiced there. When spring came, small shoots thrust themselves up through the slats of the deck, making me think of all the eggs that would have spilled onto the stove if I hadn’t practiced.

For all her respect for tradition, Julia was not stuck in the past. She readily embraced the new good nonstick pans that came on the market, forsaking her trusty cast-iron omelet pan that had to be seasoned periodically so the eggs would slide around freely. When the food processor made it to America, she tried it out on everything—chopping, mincing, slicing, pureeing—and was completely won over. I remember that I was so smitten when she showed me how easily you could puree fish for a quenelle, suddenly making that French delicacy something anyone could whip up, that I immediately bought myself a Robot Coupe, as it was called then (it gave up the ghost only last year). Of course, every time we reprinted her books, they would be updated to include the food processor when it really did the job well.

Still, Julia was very much a hands-on cook, and she loved slapping around a hunk of meat and massaging a bird with butter (when asked why she did that, she replied, “The chicken seems to like it”). One Christmas when my husband, Evan, and I were in Provence, I went over to Julia’s to help her prepare Christmas dinner. There she was in her kitchen with a large goose. It’s very important, she told me, that its feet were still attached so she could crack the ankle bones and pull out the tendons to make the legs more tender. Whereupon she plopped the bird on the tile floor and placed a broomstick over the ankles. Then she stood on the broomstick, slit the ankle skin, hooked her fingers around a tendon, and pulled—“Just like pulling a cork,” she said—and out it came.

Julia was not interested in writing for sissies, or “flimsies,” as she sometimes called them. She used gutsy language and called a spade a spade. How she scoffed when I told her of the grown man who took a cooking class with Marion Cunningham. He didn’t understand the recipe direction to toss the onions in a bowl; he figured it meant putting a bowl at one end of the kitchen and tossing the vegetables across the room (to aerate them, he supposed). Julia’s response was emphatic: “Never let that man in the kitchen again.”

Above all, I learned from working with her that she really meant what she said when she wrote of cooking in Mastering: “The most important ingredient you can bring to it is the love of cooking for its own sake.”