Charlotte Snyder Turgeon and Julia McWilliams Child were both members of the class of 1934 at Smith College, and both turned out to be culinary meteors in the gastronomic firmament of the United States. Julia’s Mastering the Art of French Cooking, the first of her eight cookbooks, appeared in 1961. By 1961, Charlotte had already published six cookbooks, including Cooking for Christmas (1950), Good Food from France (1951), Food to Make You Famous (1953), French Pastry (1954), and Time to Entertain (1954); she went on to write thirty-six more. Both women shared a conservative upbringing and went on to marry men who were very supportive of their careers (interestingly, in both cases their husbands were about ten years older and short). Both Julia and Charlotte spent time in France, trained at the Cordon Bleu, and ultimately took the kitchen and made it the foundation of successful public careers. I reminisced with Charlotte in Amherst, Massachusetts, about the inimitable Julia in several taped and nontaped interviews.

**NMS:** Tell me how you two met.

**CST:** Well, that summer of 1930 twenty members of the class of ’34 were picked to be on the “Push Committee,” to help the freshmen get oriented, to “push” them in the right direction, I guess. So I came from Boston and Julia from Pasadena, California. I have no idea why Smith chose the two of us. Julia was 6’2” and I was 5’2”, but we hit it off right away.

**NMS:** Were you in the same dorm?

**CST:** We were for the Push Committee, but not later, as we were in different dormitories in different parts of the campus. We were on some committees together, though, so we saw each other now and then on campus.

I remember one very funny time that Julia was in another dorm near mine, and a friend for some reason had locked her into the room. Julia tried to get out through the transom, but because she was so big, she got hung up, with one end of her on one side of the transom and the rest of her on the other.

**NMS:** How did you get her out? Frontwards or backwards?

**CST:** We helped push her backwards into the room. Then somebody found a key and we got her out. Julia went to Smith because her mother, who was an alumna, wanted her to. We had very similar upbringings: our mothers taught us to run parties, to have a good time, to be polite, but cooking—Lord, no! Nothing like that. I could just about boil water to make tea.

We were in very different groups in college. Our social lives back then were very important, but we did incidentally learn something along the way. Julia sailed through Smith with a straight C average, but in spite of that she was a very popular and intelligent woman. I went to Italy my junior year, while she stayed at Smith all four years. She played basketball, and I played tennis.

**NMS:** Did you see much of Julia after graduation?

**CST:** No, because she went back to California. Her mother died a few years after graduation, and she went to be with her father. She had been very much in love with a young man who didn’t give her the time of day, and she pined and pined. It wasn’t easy for her back then, being 6’2”. Her father had made a lot of money and had a beautiful house, but Julia had a rather boring time out there. It was the war that saved her—she went to Washington and took a job. I don’t know what it was, but it kept her busy. Then she went overseas to China and met Paul.

I, on the other hand, got married the year after graduation and began to have children, which Julia never did.

**NMS:** When did you see Julia again?
CST: In Paris, in 1946. My husband, King, was a professor of French at Amherst College and with me was taking his first possible sabbatical in France. I was in a cab, going down the Champs-Elysées, having just come from the American Embassy, in the basement of which was a commissary for the Americans living in Paris, with our week’s groceries. Food was scarce in France. I looked out the window of the cab, and there was this tall, unmistakable woman loping along with these slightly rounded shoulders. She always had such bad posture because she was trying to make herself less tall. Paul was a small man, and she was trying to be nearer to him, I suppose. I had not seen Julia since I left Smith and shouted at the driver, “Stop! Voilà une amie!” I yelled, “Julia!” and we fell all over each other and talked and talked. I went back with her to see where she was living, but Paul did not appear to be very pleased to see me.

Julia went to the Cordon Bleu Cooking School in 1949–1950; I had gone in 1937, when King had urged me to go to learn French and to learn cooking. Julia and I had many of the same teachers, despite the difference in years. We got caught up on what had happened to us since graduation. Julia had worked in a clerical job in the OSS [Office of Strategic Services] and had been stationed in Ceylon, India, and China. In China she and Paul and many other Americans were quarantined in a camp because of an outbreak of cholera. “What did you and Paul talk about?” I asked her. “Food,” she said. “What would we be having if we were home.”

NMS: By the time Mastering the Art of French Cooking was published in 1961, you had already published a number of cookbooks, hadn’t you? How did you get started on this?

CST: I can’t remember the titles in order now. The first was Tante Marie’s Kitchen (1949). My mother had died after we came back from Paris, and I went with my family to New Hampshire for the summer to take care of my father. King asked me to give a dinner party for André Maurice, his mentor from Harvard, and one of the guests asked to bring her daughter. I already had twenty-two people at the table, but I had to say yes, and she came. The dinner party was a hit, and this woman turned out to work for a New York publisher. She called me the next day to say that one of their cookbook authors had walked out without finishing her manuscript and asked if I would be interested in finishing the book. I said yes, I’d give it a try but really had no experience in this. It took me a year and a half. King was very supportive. It was published in 1949.

NMS: Then Mastering the Art of French Cooking came out, the television series began, and Julia began to be a media star. Did you two ever do any shows together?

CST: Only at Smith, at reunions, about three times, and that was in the later years. We were very loyal Smithies and were put on show. I remember tearing back to Amherst with Julia to pick up props for our demonstration in my garage: golf balls, rackets, all kinds of things. We were both clowns—never rehearsed a thing and had a lot of fun. But it was funny: the couple of times we did this at Smith, she just wouldn’t take the lead. She made me do all the work. I found myself, who was the lesser of the two by far, being pushed out in front. In spite of not being in the same crowd at college, we were good friends. I can still hear her voice calling me, “CHARLOTTE!” It was so loud you’d think she was calling me from Pasadena without aid of a telephone...
NMS: *On the average, how often did you two see each other?*

CST: Oh, about twice a year, sometimes more often. I would usually go down to Cambridge, and we might go out to lunch. A couple of times King and I were invited to dinner parties at Julia’s home.

NMS: *Tell me about Paul.*

CST: He didn’t like me, and it was mutual. Things were never relaxed when he was around. I found him very dictatorial. He made it very clear that he considered me a threat to Julia’s career and wanted to get me out of the way.

NMS: *Was Julia aware of this?*

CST: Julia was aware of this with a lot of people, not just me, but it was never an issue between us. We were not on the same train. We had completely different aims and audiences. When King and I got back from his sabbatical in France, I realized that there were all these young Amherst faculty wives who were scared to death of cooking and had to live on a nickel, the poor things. I wrote my cookbooks for them, and others like them. I just wanted to make the cooking part of life intelligible and fun. What Julia wanted was to have Americans know how wonderful French cooking was, to translate French cuisine and make it accessible. I come from a family where we were always helping those who had less than we did, and I guess I had a kind of missionary spirit. Julia was more formal, and she lived in a higher society of publishers and money. I was busy bringing up all these kids and traveling a lot for my books. We were in a different category, with a different audience. We never felt competitive; there was room for us both.

NMS: *Julia also used to summer in Maine. Did you ever see each other there?*

CST: No, never. She would call me on her way to their place on Mt. Desert Island, but she never visited me. Probably because I had all these children around. I asked her a number of times, but she was adamant. She was adamant anyway. She did come to visit me in Amherst, though, and I remember her room being incredibly neat when she’d leave. You could have eaten off the floor—much better than my housekeeping.

NMS: *Some people faulted her for not responding to new trends in cooking.*

CST: She was trained in the classical way, as was I. It’s very hard to get away from that. It’s very good and it works!

NMS: *What about her famous kitchen in Cambridge?*

CST: A less impressive kitchen I have never been in! It was sort of a sickly green, and she hung a lot of equipment on the walls, as she had so little space. She did have a large pantry, with all sorts of wonderful dishes and crystal, which I love, too. For her size it was a very modest kitchen. She had a big table in the middle of it, and it was hard to get behind it—you had to do a slide, slide, and a one-two-three, and pull your tummy in. As Julia got older, and after Paul went into a nursing home, she ate almost all of her meals at that table. I shared a number of lunches with her there. Paul helped design her kitchen—he was a very clever man with words and machines. He filled his life with her life the last twenty years, after he retired from the diplomatic service.

NMS: *Did he manage Julia?*

CST: Nobody ever managed Julia! But she was very deferential to him. She knew how to manage her work, her house, and him. You have to remember that Julia and I were trained in very conservative gender roles back in 1930, even though we had very modern parents. But theirs was a real love affair—he adored her and she him. One day I picked her up for lunch at her house in Cambridge, and she and Paul did a good-bye scene that had me totally embarrassed. Such smooching! “Yes, dear, I love you. Yes, dear, I’ll be back…” You’d think it was good-bye forever, and we were only going out to lunch.

They complemented each other well. He was very precise and neat, whereas she was more of a Sloppy Joe in some respects. He was so precise that his very deliberate process of opening a wine bottle used to drive me nuts.

NMS: *How did she handle her celebrity?*

CST: Julia was a very private person. I remember once going out to dinner with some friends and her at the Ritz in Boston. Everyone was buzzing when they saw her, but she sailed through that dining room like a ship. She held her head high and went straight to her table. It was really something. She just never let it get to her. I am so full of admiration for her.

NMS: *You went to her house in Provence, didn’t you?*
CST: Yes, three times. When King died (in 1987), Julia called me up and offered me the use of La Pitchoune. “Delightful place, Charlotte, you should go!” So I did. It was built on the side of a hill and had a great view, a lovely patio, big living and dining rooms, three bedrooms, and another green kitchen. I rented it twice more, and that’s where I got to know Simca well—she lived next door. [Simca was Simone Beck, one of the coauthors of Mastering the Art of French Cooking.] Simca was a lovely person, but she wore the same black outfit day in and day out for all the time I knew her.

NMS: Tell me about the celebration Smith had in Julia's honor in November 2004.

CST: The celebration was wonderful. Everyone on campus, about 3,500 people, ate the same thing: the guests of honor, the students, everyone. It was a classic Julia menu: French onion soup gratinée, salmon wrap with cucumber, coquilles St. Jacques, coq au vin, and reine de Saba cake. The women who ran the celebration really got the feeling of what Julia would have liked. The three of us who were the guests of honor (Julia’s niece, her roommate, and I), our bosoms dripping with orchids, were very impressed from different points of view as to how Julia would have accepted this. Unbeknownst to most people, the sale of her Cambridge house helped fund Smith’s new Campus Center, but Julia would not let them put her name on the building. She was very devoted to Smith.

Julia was always friendly, but she could also be tough and imperious. No, I guess “commanding” is the word. She knew what she wanted and she got what she wanted. And still very human, and a lot of fun. Great sense of humor.

There was a lot more to Julia than food.