One afternoon late in January 1953, Paul Child took a seat in the sunny kitchen at 81 rue de l’Université and waited to see what Julia would produce for lunch. For the last several months she had been hard at work with her French colleague, Simone Beck, trying to build an authentic French cookbook for American home cooks. (Louisette Bertholle, who had dreamed up the original project with Simca, soon dropped out of the day-to-day collaboration). Paul had been eating his way conscientiously through Julia’s recipe tests, and today’s meal—an experiment with American products purchased at the embassy’s commissary—was a complete flop. Afterwards, Julia described the whole mess in a frustrated letter to Avis De Voto, her friend and confidante in Cambridge, Massachusetts. “I have just served my poor husband the most miserable lunch of frozen haddock Duglère, frozen ‘fresh’ string beans and ‘minute’ rice,” she fumed. “It is just no fun to eat that stuff, no matter how many French touches and methods you put to it. It ain’t French, it ain’t good, and the hell with it.”

“It ain’t French” and “it ain’t good”—here was a double-barreled judgment that should have blown American convenience products right out of the manuscript. Remarkably, it didn’t. Julia and Simca worked on the book for another eight years, and during that time Julia doggedly kept an open mind about convenience foods, just on the chance that a box of frozen peas or a can of bouillon might be able to earn its way honestly into a classic recipe. Ultimately such products played only a minuscule role in Mastering the Art of French Cooking, but Julia’s approach to this quintessentially non-French aspect of her subject was characteristic of the way she explored one of the continuing issues in her life’s work with food. What makes it French? she often wondered about the cuisine that figured so largely in her culinary consciousness. What exactly is le goût français? And most important, what sort of relationship could possibly exist between French cooking and American cooks?

After that dreary lunch, Julia cheered herself up by going for a restorative walk along la rue de Seine, basking in the streets, the shops, the smells, and the people. She adored Paris, and her soul-stirring passion for the city was right at the center of her passion for French food. She had discovered them simultaneously back in 1948, when Paul was assigned to the Paris office of the United States Information Agency; and in the blaze of that discovery, she had forged a career and a commitment. Now she was in the process of laboriously defining the cuisine with which she had fallen in love, breaking it down into its smallest components and putting them back together so that for the first time they would make sense to people like herself—ambitious home cooks from a country French gastronomes viewed with horror and derision.

As an American who considered herself an authority on French cuisine, Julia was in a peculiar position: she wasn’t supposed to exist. According to all the verities of French life and thought, no American—and certainly no woman—could hope to comprehend the profound mysteries that gave rise to their incomparable cuisine. Pragmatic down to her toes, Julia did not believe mysteries were in any way related to good cooking. (Even the term “cuisine” could make her roll her eyes: sometimes she spelled it “kweezeen.”) The idea that wondrous and ineffable traditions were granted pride of place among French food lovers, while her own rigorous testing of methods and ingredients was seen as the pleasant little pastime of an embassy wife, infuriated her. She often fell into conversations about food with her French friends, only to end up gritting her teeth as they lectured her with a pitying attitude of noblesse oblige. Worse, she could frequently see their information was riddled with inaccuracies, but if she disputed it, nobody listened to her. “There is just an enormous amount of dogmatism to be gotten through in this country,” she complained to Avis. “Cooking being a major art, there are all sorts of men’s gastronomical societies, and books, and great names, and ‘The real ways’ of doing things, many of which have become sacred cows. If Montagné said such and such, it’s pretty much of a gospel because he is revered by men’s gastronomical societies.”
But apart from those occasions when their friends and acquaintances started sounding like what she and Paul called “dogmatic meatballs,” Julia adored the French—their charm and sensuality, their affection for all the good things of life, and the way they put food at the center of the culture. Cooking was a way for Julia to experience her beloved France in body, mind, and spirit. But she also understood very clearly she was never more American than when she was cooking. The giant question mark that hovered over her stove while she worked, driving her to ask and ponder and challenge and test, could have been the Stars and Stripes itself.

Her domestic life, too, was far more American than it was French. “I do everything kitchenwise for myself, and never have anyone in when we entertain, doing all marketing, cooking, serving, etc. myself,” she reported to Avis. “No one, except the concierge and some artists’ families we know and some professorial types live in this fashion. ‘They’ just don’t know what la Vie Americaine is like.” Food was her joy as well as her career, and she certainly wasn’t about to hand over the cooking to someone else. But she also relished the sense of pride and confidence she had learned, through considerable trial and error, to bring to a role she called “chef-hostess.” One of her goals for the book was to inspire a similar pride and confidence among American homemakers, in the hope they would cast off their appalling casseroles and gather the courage to cook. It was for the
chef-hostess that she devised one of the distinguishing features of the book: if there was any possible way for a dish to be prepared ahead of time, at least to a certain point, she and Simca would figure it out and explain it. Hence she experimented endlessly to come up with ahead-of-time procedures that wouldn’t affect the final quality of the dish. Early on in their work, she sent Simca drafts of recipes with a “funny mark”—an asterisk in a circle—to indicate the stages that could be done in advance of zero hour. “Do you find this a good idea?” she asked Simca. “I think it will be useful for the usa. Housewife can cook her dinner while she is boiling the diapers…and what a lovely mixture of flavors that will make!” As we shall see, “housewife” would become a term Julia never used without a shudder, but “chef-hostess” was a title she wore proudly all her life.

As work on the cookbook progressed, it became clear Julia’s moral role in the project was to be American, and Simca’s was to be French. The two friends argued constantly during their long and loving collaboration, and a frequent flashpoint was Simca’s unwillingness to wear the mantle of authority Julia sported so comfortably. Simca had studied with notable French chefs; she had been cooking in her own French kitchens since childhood; and she brought peerless knowledge, talent, and intuition to the book. Julia treasured her, but the two of them were very different when it came to standing up for their own exhaustively researched conclusions. It was hard for Simca to believe she had any right to assert her expertise in the face of the most thoroughly practical for life and cooking [in America]. In other words, it is no bastardization or adaptation of French cooking, it is the real thing.” The recipes were long, she conceded in another letter to Houghton Mifflin, but they had to be if they were going to work. “Because of their completeness, our recipes will produce the genuine French result,” she promised, and described the book as “a modern primer of classical French cooking—an up-to-date Escoffier, if you will.”11 When she circulated portions of a draft manuscript among a few friends back in America, she was surprised to learn these eager, open-minded cooks—her ideal audience—found it “pedantic.” The long, detailed explanations of classic procedures overwhelmed her readers. Julia set about rewriting, but she wouldn’t sacrifice the explanations. “I think this is all important, and the names and the old methods be correct,” she told Avis. “Thus the book cannot be attacked as being ‘not really French cooking.’”12

At the heart of what was “really French” about French cooking was an elusive quality that she and Simca called le gout français—the very flavor of Frenchness.13 Like any flavor, this one was hard to describe in words but instantly recognizable on the palate. Julia put a great deal of thought into what it was that enabled a cook to achieve le gout français, and she concluded being in France had nothing to do with it. “One runs into so many Americans who go to France for the first time and are overwhelmed by the wonderful taste of the food,” she wrote to John Leggett, Houghton Mifflin’s New York editor. “Some of them come away convinced that only the magic of being French could make possible the creation of such wonders, and that French ingredients are so different and so special that one could never achieve those tastes in the usa.” Julia was wholeheartedly opposed to this way of thinking. She herself had been one of those Americans enraptured by their first taste of French food, and she often marveled over the difference between French
and American fresh produce. “Strawberries, for instance, are dreamberries,” she told Avis. “Beans are so deliciously beany.” Yet none of this meant the flavor of France was beyond the reach of American cooks. As she declared to Simca, “If one is using French methods, and French ingredients or as near an equivalent as can be found, one achieves GOUT FRANÇAIS.”

But for Julia, who always tempered purity with practicality, there was a fair amount of wiggle room in the concept of “equivalent” ingredients. Wine, for instance, was obviously a crucial element in French recipes, but in 1950s America, French wine was expensive, and few cooks kept it around for use in the kitchen. Julia thought California reds were an adequate substitute, but not the whites, which became sour with cooking. Writing to Avis in 1953, Julia noted that dry vermouth was a possible replacement, but the taste was “pretty strong and herbal.” “If wine is not used, especially in the fish sauces, it just won’t taste French,” she concluded. But four years later, when she and Paul were living in Washington, D.C., she could see that suggesting a substitute was going to be absolutely necessary. Americans just didn’t drink wine regularly; if they happened to buy a bottle for cooking, “they wouldn’t know what to do with the rest of it,” she noted mournfully. So vermouth it was. “I now use it almost exclusively, just to see how it works, and find it perfectly satisfactory,” she reported to Simca. “For delicate things, I use ⅛ or ⅜ the amount of Vermouth as I would use it wine.”

Similarly, she and Simca experimented with countless combinations of American all-purpose flour, cake flour, butter, margarine, and Crisco before they arrived at a puff pastry that tasted French, and Julia grew to be such a fan of Uncle Ben’s Converted Rice that she called it l’Oncle Ben’s. Even the ingredients that seemed to give a dish its very essence—the particular fish in a bouillabaisse, for instance—never struck her as sacrosanct. Julia refused to honor that brand of wisdom about bouillabaisse that insisted the old masters, which she and Simca were subjecting to rigorous scrutiny and testing, but in the notion of French cooking as a kind of intelligent design—fundamental procedures that could be applied to all the cuisines of the world. To understand French cooking, she often said, was to master “good cooking” itself. Faced with American canned and frozen foods, Julia leaped to the challenge: if there was any way to make them taste French, she would find it. But when a book on shortcut cooking titled Cuisine d’urgence appeared, she read doom on every page. If technique was lost, the end was nigh. “I find the sauce-making methods horrifying, and also disturbing, and hope that too many people will not take to it,” she wrote to Simca. “It will be the death of La Cuisine Fçse [sic].”

Yet even on the subject of technique, she was willing to consider modern innovations if they achieved the right results, and she certainly didn’t mind shocking the sages. “This whole field is wide open, that of using the electric aids for a lot of fancy French stuff, and we’ll be presenting something entirely new,” she told Avis. “No sacred cows for us.” The electric mixer struck her as a wonderful gadget, especially for such horrendous jobs as making quenelles, and after arduous research and experimenting, she and Simca came up with a batch “which were the best, the tenderest and the most delicious anyone could hope to eat.” A secret test on “some very fin bec French men”—serving them mixer-made quenelles without revealing the method—proved entirely successful. “They all said these were the best, the tenderest and the most delicious anyone could hope to eat.” The pressure cooker, on the other hand, proved disappointing. “Stinking, nasty bloody pressure cookers, I hate them!” she wrote to Avis after a long day with cabbage.
soups. “Maybe I don’t use it right, but I will persist with an open if distasteful mind.” Ultimately she decided the pressure cooker could be used for stocks but not soups—“It just does not bring out the beauties of soups, for some reason, and does not give them that delicious French taste.”

As Julia saw it, mechanical aids could make an honorable contribution to French cooking, not only because they helped with the “dog work” but because the equipment could make intimidating recipes seem less so. Quenelles, she claimed exuberantly if not exactly prophetically, were going to be “food of the masses” at last. Simple dishes, well prepared, always won her respect, but for her own part she liked cooking best when it was akin to mountain climbing, not a stroll in the park. She went into the kitchen because that was the place where her mind was engaged most happily and energetically. “Me, I am not an intellectual,” she wrote to Avis. “I am trying to train my mind….But, except for La Cuisine, I find I have to push myself to build a thirst for how the atomic bomb works, or a study of Buddhism, etc.” In the course of discovering French cooking, she had also discovered her imagination, her powers of analysis, her scholarly skills, and a taste for hard work. To drop pasta into a pot of boiling water was fine, but it wasn’t cooking. To make quenelles, on the other hand, that was cooking, and the mixer simply helped out. Years later, when
her friend Anne Willan was planning the curriculum for La Varenne, the Paris cooking school, Julia urged her to establish a place early in the schedule for “difficult or advanced items, like puff pastry.” The size and scope of the demand constituted, to Julia, the essence of her chosen work. As she put it, “The sooner one gets to pastry the more of a cook one begins to feel.”

In 1957 Paul was posted back to the United States for two years, and Julia had her first extended opportunity to think about the book from the perspective of real-life America. Living in D.C., she was enthralled by the opportunities for good cooking—supermarket produce sections where she could select each mushroom herself, tender chickens already cut up, delicious asparagus arriving from California in season. When Simca commented on the notorious lack of flavor in American produce, Julia jumped to its defense. “One reason American cooking is really so dreadful is that people have compromised, and compromised, and the advertisers have made people feel like fools if they even wanted to take time over things,” she told Simca.

During her stay in Washington, Julia hoped to work up some advance publicity for the book by getting a few of the recipes published in women’s magazines. After much consideration, she put together an article featuring a lengthy recipe for waterzooi de poulet. It would be timely because of the World’s Fair in Brussels, and she felt it would pose no special difficulties for the home cook. She sent it to John Leggett to “peddle around,” urging him to explain to magazine food editors that although the recipe was long, it was not at all complicated—merely detailed. To her surprise, there were no takers, even though the recipe simply required poaching the chicken, juliennining and cooking the aromatic vegetables, and making a rather tricky sauce with egg yolks, cream, and broth. Helen McCully of McCall’s food section took one look and said that if she showed this recipe to her editor, “she would probably faint dead away.” McCully added that she herself could tell what a well-constructed recipe it was, but “to the non-cook it certainly looks like quite a chore.” Julia was not discouraged. She shortened the recipe and sent it back to Leggett along with another possibility—boned, stuffed duck in a pastry crust. “This is a marvelous dish, can be served hot or cold, and makes a splendid effect,” she wrote hopefully. “Most people think this is the kind of impossible thing only a chef could do, but it is quite within the range of even the modest cook, if supplied with good directions such as ours.” Leggett had no luck selling the articles, and in March 1958, Houghton Mifflin rejected the whole manuscript.

It was the housewife problem. Dorothy de Santillana, the Houghton Mifflin editor who had been overseeing the project, recognized the extraordinary quality of the work but found the recipes far too demanding for the American cook, “who is so apt to be mother, nurse, chauffeur, and cleaner as well.” (It didn’t help that Julia and Simca had delivered only the sections devoted to poultry and sauces, hoping the book might appear as a series of volumes “at least every two years on up to the grave, as the subject is vast.”) De Santillana suggested they rethink their entire approach.

They did, instantly. Whatever it took to save the book, they would do. Less than a week after the rejection, Julia came back with a new proposal. She and Simca would cut, they would revise, they would reconfigure, and they would produce “a short and snappy book directed to the somewhat sophisticated housewife/chauffeur.” The recipes would remain authentically French, but they would “look short” and would include canned and frozen foods if possible. De Santillana was pleased, and a month later Julia wrote again, sending a new table of contents and a description of the volume as they had reconceived it. By now she had come to her senses and was backtracking a bit. “We feel that sauces made of canned mushroom soup and bottled mayonnaise, frozen food casseroles and soups with monosodium glutamate, and the like, are well taken care of elsewhere,” she said diplomatically. “Furthermore, it is just about impossible to make them taste French. A short book such as this should devote itself, in our opinion, to the pleasure of fresh ingredients.” But she vowed to keep the explanations and instructions brief. “The book will be mostly straight recipes,” she promised. When the new manuscript was delivered some eighteen months later, it was a major improvement over the first but far from the “short and snappy” recipe collection Houghton Mifflin was expecting. “It is a big, expensive cookbook of elaborate information,” the editor in chief of the company wrote to Julia apologetically, “and might well prove formidable to the American housewife.” There she
was again: the housewife. This time Houghton Mifflin rejected the book for good.

In the end, of course, Julia and Simca won. The manuscript was sent to Knopf, where “the American housewife” was less of a totem, and duly published as a masterwork. Within a few years, television had made Julia the most famous and respected culinary authority in America, and she no longer worried about being taken seriously by French male gastronomical societies. She was still committed to the careful balancing act between French cooking and American cooks she had refined so painstakingly for Mastering, but now she began to have a good time juggling the components. Her definition of la véritable French cuisine loosened to the point that she didn’t hesitate to feature paella and lasagna on her television programs. These were not authentic versions of the dishes, she assured viewers, just delicious versions—delicious because French methods and ingredients went into them.

By the mid-sixties, when she and Simca went to work on Volume ii, she was fascinated as ever with classic techniques and flavors—their hot pursuit of a perfect recipe for French bread is legendary—but she no longer struggled with her culinary identity as an American. On the whole, Volume ii was devoted to thoroughly French food, including charcuterie and pastries, but the section on broccoli shows Julia’s new perspective. She loved broccoli and couldn’t resist including it in Volume i even though it was rarely eaten in France. But she had confined herself to just a few instructions, almost apologetic in tone. In Volume ii, she stood up and gave it “the full treatment,” eight pages of French recipes from à la polonaise to timbales—“because this is a book for Americans, and broccoli is one of our best vegetables, and the treatment is à la française,” she explained firmly to Simca.  

In her very next book, From Julia’s Child’s Kitchen, she allowed herself a genuinely free hand, right down to an apple betty she christened “Pommes Rosemarie,” and she often said it was her favorite book. “Now I don’t have to be so damned classic and ‘French,’” she explained to her editor, Judith Jones of Knopf. “To hell with that….I am French trained, and I do what I want with my background.” Although she continued to trust French techniques as the best starting point for any sort of cookery, the distinction between “French” and “not-so-French” was no longer the basis of her approach to food. What emerged in its stead were two categories that had been lurking in the shadows until her career caught up with them.

Early in 1961, as she and Simca were winding down their work on Volume i, Julia looked back on some of the issues they had been wrestling with for nearly a decade.

“People are always saying WHAT MAKES FRENCH COOKING SO DIFFERENT FROM OTHER NATIONS’ COOKING?” she mused in a letter to Simca, and she set down four principles that struck her as definitive.

Serious interest in food and its preparation

Tradition of good cooking…which forms French tastes from youth

Enjoyment of cooking for its own sake—LOVE

Willingness to take the few extra minutes to be sure things are done as they should be done

Nothing on this list, except for “French tastes,” distinguishes French cooking from any other noteworthy cuisine. On the contrary, it’s a list that beautifully sums up Julia’s fundamental thinking about food even when she was deeply committed to le gout français, as she was when she wrote this. In truth, her highest term of culinary praise was never “French” or “professional” or “delicious,” though she regularly used such words to describe wonderful food. Her highest praise was the word “serious”—the very first word that came to her fingertips when she started to type these principles. A “serious” cook, to Julia, was a careful, mindful, thoroughly knowledgeable cook, whose pleasure you could taste in the food. Thus the great admiration she expressed for Madhur Jaffrey and Diana Kennedy in later years, though she had little interest in Indian or Mexican cooking.

And at the opposite end of the spectrum from the serious cook was the dark angel who hovered over the last principle in the list, the cook who refused to put in those extra minutes it took to reach perfection. This cook—male or female, French or American, famous name or anonymous homebody—was fatally associated with the term “housewife.” Julia never did recover from her early, bruising experiences with that word, and she consistently refused to be associated with such creatures. As she put it many times over the years, whenever the subject of housewives came up, “We are aiming at PEOPLE WHO LIKE TO COOK.” Yes, supermarket ingredients could be transformed into classic French dishes. Yes, you could make a lasagna and call it French. Yes, would-be French cooks had a lot to learn from Madhur Jaffrey. But Americans shouldn’t so much as pick up a whisk unless they could delight in the work, relish the exacting details, and eat with gladness. “Why is French cooking so good?” Julia asked herself in 1957, as French standards were clashing with American realities all across her desk. The answer was simple and came straight from her own kitchen: “It is love that makes it so.”
NOTES
1. Julia Child to Avis De Voto, 30 January 1953. Julia Child Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Cambridge, Ma. (All citations that follow refer to material in this collection.)
3. Child to De Voto, 8 January 1953.
5. Child to De Voto, 8 January 1953.
6. Ibid.
9. Child to De Voto, 8 January 1953.
12. Child to De Voto, 18 February 1953.
15. Child to De Voto, 4 March 1953.
25. Child to Dorothy de Santillana, February 1953.
27. Child to de Santillana, 24 September 1953.
29. Child to De Voto, 3 February 1953.
30. Child to De Voto, 4 March 1953.
35. Child to Leggett, 10 December 1957.
37. Child to Leggett, 10 January 1958.
41. Child to de Santillana, 23 April 1958.
42. Paul Brooks to Child, 6 November 1959.
44. Child to Judith Jones, 4 September 1973.
46. Child to Willan and Cherniavsky, 1 June 1974.