The French-American culinary connection goes back at least to the age of Thomas Jefferson, who brought the terroir wisdom of vintners and farmers back to his Virginia plantation. Like this eighteenth-century diplomat and future president, Julia Child would translate for her fellow Americans her patiently acquired knowledge of French culinary techniques and traditions.

Julia derived an essential component of her rise to sophistication from her encounters with the most illustrious gourmet of his time, Curnonsky, Prince des Gastronomes. The title was officially voted on, but the name was his chosen pen name. Russian titles and Slavic names had always been “in” for the French. Add a suffix and eureka! You have achieved Slavic onomastia: Why Not? (or, in Latin, Cur Non?). Thus Curnonsky was born.

The “former” Maurice-Edmond Sailland hailed from the Anjou. At the time of their meeting, Julia was thirty-eight, Curnonsky seventy-eight, a well-published and revered culinary historian, journalist, and travel writer, an intimate of Colette and other 1950s legends. By contrast, Julia was only just beginning her culinary career. Their six encounters made a marked impression on her, and the two corresponded sporadically until Curnonsky’s death in 1956.

Julia’s response to “Cur,” as his colleagues called him, reveals much about her personality and her own place in the history of French gastronomes.

Their first meeting took place when Curnonsky came to Cordon Bleu to lecture at one of the afternoon sessions of a ten-month course where Julia was the lone woman enrolled among the aspiring male chefs. She had arrived in Paris just three months married, in search of a career or perhaps merely a job. Thanks to her husband Paul’s sophisticated palate and love of things French, Julia discovered her passion for French cuisine.

She had already dabbled in many occupations. During a World War II stint with the Office of Strategic Services (America’s first international espionage agency), when serving with Lord Mountbatten in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Julia had met Paul. They were posted to France in 1949, and in October of that year, she enrolled in the Cordon Bleu, then a humble school with one sink and no printed menus. There she soon became devoted to her master teacher and mentor, Chef Max Bugnard. Julia was also impressed by the teaching skills of a young teacher (and Montmartre restaurant chef) named Pierre Mangelotte; his dramatic gestures (“Voici! Une Pomme de terre!”) struck a cord in the Pasadena native who used to revel in the dramatic productions at her elementary school. She seems not to have registered any response to her first encounter with the renowned visiting lecturer, Curnonsky, Prince des Gastronomes.

This aging French culinary writer was described as “a [sic] ebullient journalist with a zany, bohemian edge” who combined Left Bank avant-garde with the “stuffy, status-conscious swank of the mainstream gourmet.” Child saw less of his legendary wit and more of the “stuffy” in his classroom demonstration and lecture. She herself lived among the younger avant-garde on the Left Bank with Paul, a diplomat—and painter who had known fellow artists in 1920s Paris. Perhaps Julia saw only the stuffy lecturer and not the bon vivant and wit. Surely she saw Curnonsky as establishment but admired a fellow gourmand who had a regular table at all the major restaurants and who dined amidst an entourage of friends and admirers.

Julia was much more interested in the professional chefs—after all, she was studying cooking techniques with methodical single-mindedness. Julia would learn a recipe at her Cordon Bleu class in the morning and then go back to the apartment to make love to her husband and prepare lunch. Following the three-hour afternoon school demonstration and lecture, it was back to the apartment in rue de l’Université to cook Paul the day’s classroom dish for his dinner. Weekends she worked in her kitchen, cataloging ingredients and practicing techniques.

Her two culinary heroes were Cordon Bleu chef Max Bugnard, who specialized, as she would later, in sauces, meat, and fish, and Bugnard’s own mentor and hero, the...

Escoffier “pulled the nineteenth century right along with him into the twentieth century, and there it remained until the Second World War.” A veritable dictator of precise formulations, he decreed the exact ingredients and proportions and warned “please don’t ask questions.” Thus chefs (and their students) in the first half of the twentieth century “tended to drug themselves with Escoffier and [do] their cooking by dogma.” Such was the period of Child’s French apprenticeship, perhaps the final golden age of the classical approach to French cooking. No one revered the grand tradition more than Julia Child.

Sometime in March 1950, after six months of intensive study that bordered on obsession (Paul once claimed, “I can’t pry Julia loose from the kitchen day or night—not even with an oyster-knife”), Julia decided to stop attending morning classes. Her frustration was compounded by the repetition of dishes in the Cordon Bleu morning cooking sessions as well as the presence of lackadaisical ex-cîts in her class. She decided to study independently for her exam with two of her teachers, Bugnard and Claude Thillmont, the latter a pastry chef at Café de Paris, and to attend demonstrations. She had completed six months of the ten-month course of study, cooked every dish she had learned more than once, experimented in her kitchen in the rue de l’Université, prepared many a dinner party for eight, and spent individual time with her mentor haunting stores such as kitchen equipment purveyor Dehillerin amid the food markets of Les Halles.

She now moved into the field, so to speak, visiting restaurants and traveling. She and Paul systematically studied each quarter of Paris and sought out good chefs with strong regional ties. Thanks to her visiting father’s munificence, they also added Lapérouse, Le Pré Catalan, La Tour d’Argent, and Le Grand Véfour to their growing list of multistarred restaurants.

In fair weather Julia and Paul took their Chevy to nearly every region of France. The Saturday outings were usually picnics and visits to country markets. Julia was discovering the mind-boggling variety of produce of every French region. This passion for terroir also turned out to be Curnonsky’s passion and expertise. So Julia and Paul’s field trips brought them a greater appreciation for Curnonsky. His monumental twenty-eight-volume encyclopedia of France’s regional food, Le Tour de France gastronomique (1921–1925), is said to be the first example of gastronomic tourism. The publication of Trésor gastronomique de la France in 1933 conferred lasting legitimacy on regional dishes that have now become sacrosanct in the national cuisine.

Curnonsky became the champion of a particular kind of French cooking—neither haute cuisine nor peasant cooking, but the local or regional dishes that were “apt to become part of the national cuisine because they are within reach of ordinary mortals,” dishes such as confit and foie gras. The Childs used his books along with the Michelin guides and reveled in the link between highway and table. They shared Curnonsky’s attempt to give prestige to bourgeois and provincial kitchens, as opposed to the sophistication of the famous Parisian restaurants.

Julia’s second recorded meeting with the “Prince” was an haute cuisine feast for Curnonsky on his eightieth birthday. The “Great Gastronomic Banquet,” held on October 12, 1952, was probably organized by the Académie des Gastronomes, which Curnonsky had founded in 1928. The Académie brought together eighteen French gastronomic societies (including Julia’s Cercle des Gourmettes and Paul’s Le Club Gastronomique) chefs, hoteliers, provision providers, and writers. Three hundred and eighty-seven people attended the banquet, which because of the number of courses and speeches dragged on until after one in the morning. Each attendee, decorated with chest ribbons and medals, sat before nine wine glasses. The thousands of glasses, gold chains, and colorful badges made the room sparkle. Paul writes that the guests included all those who “whirl around the French food-flame.” Julia and Paul admired Curnonsky’s accomplishment in organizing French gastronomes to talk about food and consolidate their knowledge in codifying French cuisine—indeed, Julia herself was searching for the codes, hoping to transmit them to her compatriots. The Académie des Gastronomes would be a model for British and American gastronomes in later years, and Curnonsky’s wit would live on in such sayings as “the art of eating has nothing to do with the need for nourishment.”

Just ten days after the great banquet, Julia Child had her third meeting with Curnonsky. She called on the god of the food scene at his apartment at 14, Place Henri Bergson, just east of the Gare St. Lazare. Julia went with her friend Simca (Simone Beck), with whom she had been offering small cooking classes in the home of their mutual friend Louisette.

Left: Julia and Paul at a party in their apartment at 81 rue de l’Université, Paris (perhaps in mockery of the beribboned and knighted culinary organizations).
Les Trois Gourmandes, as they called themselves, were planning a book that would teach Americans how to cook with classical French-cooking techniques. Indeed, an earlier forty-eight-page spiral-bound recipe booklet that Beck and Bertholle self-published had an English translation called *What's Cooking in France.* The Prince des Gastronomes had himself written the introduction!

Julia and Simca arrived at four p.m.; Curnonsky welcomed them in his pajamas and robe. But he was spirited and charming and well awake, especially when they handed him a carton of Chesterfields that Julia had purchased at the American Embassy commissary. Julia found Curnonsky warm and charming, as they chatted about restaurants and chefs, the travels that the Childs had taken with his guidebooks, and the link between good eating and tourism. He also listened to their plans for their home-cooking classes and a new book for American cooks. The women departed aglow and in agreement with Curnonsky’s assertion that food should look like what it is—a belief Julia insisted on throughout her culinary career.

Paul, who was always more skeptical, described this visit in a letter to his brother (implying that there were other visits) as Julia going “like a public affairs officer keeping in touch with a préfet.” Curnonsky, known for his appetite and size, weighed 260 pounds and was so heavy that he had to be carried by six friends to his favorite restaurants. He traveled now from dinner to banquet to wine tasting. A study in contrast was Julia at 6’2”. She towered over her mentor, Max Bugnard (whose teacher Escoffier wore elevated shoes to reach the stove!). Though already forty—rather late to be commencing her life career—she was lithe and strong and had the stamina necessary for the kitchen. Both Madame Brassard, owner of the Cordon Bleu, and Julia’s French partner Simone Beck noted her strength in lifting the heaviest pot or mortar.

The last time that Julia encountered Curnonsky was the most telling, for she revealed her new confidence and the growth that she had achieved in her understanding of French cuisine. She had begun to wander from the strictly classical...
Escoffier tradition. She and Paul had been dining at the tables of André Pic (Valence), Fernand Point (Vienne), and Alexandre Dumaine (Saulieu), each of whom was exploring new ways of cooking. All three master chefs, who were to inspire the revolutionary generation to come, were cooking outside of Paris. The seeds of modern cooking thus began in the provinces through which the Childs traveled to and from Marseilles in preparation for Paul’s new posting there. When they moved, Julia was planning to continue, by mail, her work on the book that would eventually become Mastering the Art of French Cooking.

This most memorable meeting with Curnonsky was a farewell party for Julia and Paul, who had returned to Paris so that Paul could take photographs of Les Trois Gourmandes preparing food in the kitchen. Paul still had his camera when they arrived for the farewell dinner for twelve, with Julia feeling a little bilious from too much dining already. Curnonsky soon arrived, a surprise for Julia, and cries went up throughout the room. He posed for pictures with the three gourmandes, and arrangements were made for Julia to come by his apartment the night before she left to give him the photographs. Paul’s image in words of the “Prince Elu des Gastronomes,” he sent to his brother: “short, fat, eagle-beaked, triple-chinned, pale-blue-eyed, witty, egocentric, spoiled and knowledgeable.”

Amid the champagne and convivial toasts, Curnonsky basked too long in the adulation and pronounced too many dictums, and Julia became disgusted by what she saw as his elitism. She privately confided to a friend in Massachusetts that he acted like “a dogmatic meatball who considers himself a gourmet but is just a big bag of wind.” She describes Curnonsky’s performance thus:

They were talking about Beurre Blanc, and how it was a mystery, and only a few people could do it, and how it could only be made with white shallots from Lorraine and over a wood fire [emphasis hers]. Pho. But that is so damned typical…making a damned mystery out of perfectly simple things just to puff themselves up. I didn’t say anything as, being a foreigner, I don’t know anything anyway. This dogmatism in France is enraging (that is really about my only criticism, otherwise I adore them).

Typically, Julia feels compassion: “HOW SAD! Have you seen him lately. I wonder what he lives on. I do hope someone is helping him and am sure some one must, as he is so well loved, etc. Que c’est triste…” And then she gets back to life and the business at hand: “Now I shall get to your chicken comments on a separate sheet of paper.”

Curnonsky died on July 22, 1956, after falling to the pavement from his apartment window.

About twenty years after his death, a group including Roger Vergé, Michel Guérard, and Richard Olney founded the Association des Amis de Curnonsky. They published a tribute, Curnonsky et ses amis, offering his favorite recipes.
In 1983 Julia Child helped to found the American Institute of Wine and Food in America, an organization dedicated to the education of the public and consisting of both professional and amateur foodies.

At her own eightieth birthday in 1992, in an echo of Curnonsky’s eightieth birthday banquet, a third generation of French chefs (Michel Guérard, Paul Bocuse, Marc Meneau) came from France to celebrate Julia Child in her native California and joined the US-based French chefs Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Michel Richard, and Roger Fessaguet to say “Merci, Julia!”—thank you for sending a generation of educated and appreciative American palates to their tables. A pioneer of pleasure in a puritan country.

NOTES
1. The revered culinary historian had a street in Paris named for him in 1973. Rue Curnonsky is in the 17th arrondissement, almost above the périphérique.

2. Details of her life are based on research, including three hundred interviews and thousands of unpublished letters used in the preparation of Appetite for Life: The Biography of Julia Child (New York: Doubleday, 1997), which devotes little to the Curnonsky relationship.


4. This and the following citations are from Rudolph Chelminski, The French at Table (New York: William Morrow, 1985), 75.

5. The bulk of Paul Child’s diary-letters to his twin brother, Charlie Child, are housed in the Julia Child Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

6. Julia kept detailed lists of restaurants and food shops in her small date books, and her husband included the names of dishes and wines of their great meals in his letters to his brother.


9. There are copies of the French and English translation of this little book in the Schlesinger Library. It bears little resemblance to the book they envisioned after Child joined the endeavor.

