“I always think that if I were very tired, it would be nice to sit in a bowl of whipped cream,” Dione Lucas once told a reporter for Look.1 The former television-cooking-show host—one of our very first—meant it as a comment on whipped cream’s loveliness, but it could also be taken as a sign that her energy was flagging at last. The interview ran in the August 1970 issue while Dione was trying to make a comeback on the heels of Julia Child’s success. But slightly more than a year later, Dione returned to her native England to be closer to her elder son, Mark. Gravely ill, she died on December 18, 1971, aged sixty-two. It had been almost exactly twenty-four years since her television debut one evening in the New York City area in December, 1947.

Today Dione Lucas has been largely forgotten, and the food-world insiders who do remember her don’t often have kind things to say—or they repeat the same old, apocryphal stories (“She’s the one who cooked squab for Hitler!”) without bothering to check them out. It’s a situation only partly remedied by Kathleen Collins’s sprightly survey, Watching What We Eat: The Evolution of Television Cooking Shows, in which one chapter is devoted mostly to Dione, including a masterful description of her TV persona (“Imagine a formidable high school science teacher, one who scared the daylights out of you but for whom you had quivering respect.”). Unfortunately, Collins also gives space to unquestioned criticisms of Dione’s “actively dislikable” off-screen personality.1 In addition, she quotes the certainly self-interested producer/director of The French Chef, Russ Morash. “They make a big deal out of Dione Lucas and all this. There was nothing,” he told Collins.4 But while Dione undeniably was not Julia, she was “something.” In 1993, her name was added to The James Beard/Perrier/Jouét Who’s Who of Food and Beverage in America, along with those of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin and Henri Soule. The keepsake program was laudatory, crediting her with investigations. jeanette schinto

Remembering Dione Lucas
about things without having any solid facts upon which to base them.” She went on, however, to express regret that there were “very few people left who know anything about [Dione].” She concluded: “I hope information about Dione’s true life will be made known to all of us.”

Gorman mentioned in her letter that she might someday write a biography of Dione. It never happened. Later in the 1990s, at Julia’s urging, Gorman donated Dione’s files to the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. (Dione’s sons had given them to Gorman in the 1970s “for her exclusive use, provided that Dione Lucas [was] credited.” She needed them to finish Dione’s last cookbook; subsequently, she published two others whose titles used Dione’s name.)

Alas, however, the files contain only a few pages written by Dione herself. Two are letters written to Gorman (and one seems retyped by the recipient); another is a single half-page of a personal reminiscence by Dione about Broadway producer Billy Rose. There are no diaries or journals. As a result, nearly twenty years later, Julia’s wish that the truth about Dione might someday be revealed has not come true.

It won’t be revealed here, either—not completely. After serious sleuthing over many months, some questions finally
can be answered unequivocally, yet many more cannot. Records are lost, memories hazy, and people gone—and Dione herself was not always truthful. What I can say is, first, she was one of our first culinary celebrities, but her personality was at odds with the whole idea of mass appeal. She saw cooking as an art and believed herself to be an artist. As a result, she found herself torn between soul matters and the temptations of commercialism, and she never did discover a workable compromise.

Second, she lived as an unconventional woman in the ultra-conventional postwar United States. “Tender loving care should be on the bottom of every recipe, every ingredient in it,” she told a radio interviewer during her comeback attempt. “And I have a very strong feeling that cooking—proper cooking, proper preparation of meals—is a very, very strong and important part of keeping a family together.” Ironically, however, her own family broke apart as she pursued her career in food.

“(Children) are wonderful to teach,” she said during the same interview. “I should say I’d like to teach children first, then men, and lastly—very much lastly, way down the ladder—women… Children don’t have any preconceived ideas… It’s like watching children when they draw or paint. It’s a wonderful thing to see… And then men, I think, do it seriously—really seriously—and they don’t—Their minds don’t flitter around all the other unnecessary things that go into our minds when we cook. They haven’t got families to think of, or whether they do the ironing properly, or whatever comes into their heads.”

It’s not a statement feminists would love, but for Dione, cooking had nothing to do with household drudgeries from which women needed to be freed. “Cooking should never become like housekeeping, like making beds,” she once told an audience of Home Service Program participants, who were being taught the benefits of gas appliances (by the gas company, of course). “Cooking is a creative art. In order to bring glamour to the dinner table, one must bring artistry to the kitchen.”

Speaking of children, I thought it crucial to contact Dione’s sons and hear their thoughts about their mother. I discovered that Peter died in 2008, but Mark graciously answered dozens and dozens of questions emailed to him over these many months. Helpful, too, were two secondary sources recently published: one a study of the architectural firm of Dione’s ex-husband, the other a biography of her artist-father. I am grateful to the authors, whose works included previously unreported details about Dione’s early life and forces that influenced her long before she set foot in a professional kitchen.

In the end, I hope you’ll agree that Dione Lucas deserves a modest place in culinary history and that she was, in Mark’s words, “an extraordinarily complex person, but essentially unsophisticated in the best sense of the term.”

**Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman**

I *am not* successful; if an artist is successful there is something wrong with his ideals. The right ideals can never be reached.
—Dione’s father, Henry Wilson, in a letter to his brother.

Many accounts, including a frequently quoted 1949 profile of Dione published in the *New Yorker*, say Dione Narone Margaris Wilson was born in Venice in 1909. While the year is correct, the place isn’t. “There’s been some publicity romancing about this one,” Mark Lucas says, “but it was Kent, England, where the Wilsons had their home and Henry Wilson, Dione’s father, had his studios.” Actually, though, as Mark discovered when he located the argument settler—his mother’s birth certificate—she was born in Kensington.

Dione was the youngest of Henry and Margaret Wilson’s four children; the others were a son, Guthlac, and daughters Fiammetta and Pernel (later known as Orrea)—all their names are in the United Kingdom, but among his masterpieces are the bronze doors of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York and those of the former headquarters of the Salada Tea Company in Boston. For several years, the family traveled between England and Italy, where casting of Henry’s bronzes took place. In fact, from 1912 to 1914, they lived there—although Dione spent most of her childhood in the family’s home in Kent, designed by Henry and completed in 1910, and that is where she first learned to cook.

The Thatched House, as it was known, had two workshops and two cottages for assistants. Besides architecture, Wilson designed jewelry, and his pieces are sought on the secondary market. He was also a teacher of jewelry skills at London’s Royal College of Art (RCA)—his alma mater—and elsewhere, including The Thatched House itself, where the Wilson children learned alongside adults.

Dione’s sister Orrea recalled in a reminiscence preserved in the Wilson archive at RCA that her father was “a great believer in… training the mind by means of training the hands from an early age.” He expected all four children “to do a daily stint in the jeweller’s workshop” and “insisted...
on our making our own designs and carrying them out.” Dione, for her part, became “a competent silversmith as a girl,” writes Cyndy Manton, author of Henry Wilson: Practical Idealist, who interviewed Orrea before she died in 1993. In fact, according to Orrea, Lady Collet of Kemsing was “pleased to own two silver spoons [Dione] made for her.” More pertinently, that training may partly account for Dione’s often remarked upon, amazing manual dexterity. (She was, for example, to stretch strudel dough so thin one could see the pattern of the tablecloth beneath it.) It may also be why on tv she seems more concerned with how a thing looks than how it tastes.

Beyond their father’s lessons, the children had little formal education. Henry’s opinion of British schools was low. Dione’s lessons were chiefly in reading and writing. She probably gained her knowledge of French and Italian from her father, too, since he was fluent in the former and very competent in the latter.

Judging from Henry’s letters to his brother, Henry had ambivalent feelings about artistic success. What is clear is that he demanded excellence from students. “I admired rather than liked Wilson,” recalled one, quoted by Manton. “He was often sarcastic and cynical. . . . His highest praise of any work was ‘Quite amusing.’” It’s easy to imagine him as a source of Dione’s teaching style, which is frequently rebuked in published reports. The cordial tv personality notwithstanding, she was famous for her withering commentary and shouting in her kitchen classrooms. “You are paying for your stupidity—when you wash a whisk with veal on it, use cold water, otherwise it cooks,” the Milwaukee Sentinel’s Rose Tusa quoted Dione in a 1964 story. “She exploded again when one of the students neglected to put her equipment in the proper place,” Tusa wrote of the session with four homemakers in Manhattan. “Who is putting all these dirty spoons on the table? I’ll shoot you all.” According to Tusa, when another student asked, “Shall I pour the sauce on now?” Dione retorted, “You never POUR, you COAT.” Nor, apparently, was Dione above administering corporal punishment. The late food writer Bert Greene, who claimed to have loved Dione “as one adores an autocratic (and sometimes outrageous) parent,” wrote nonetheless that he had a “small pink scar” on his wrist, the result of her having cracked him with a wooden spoon “for punishing a delicate sauce.”

Dione herself didn’t feel the need to defend her pedagogical techniques. When questioned by the interviewer on radio in 1970 about her shouting, she said: “I’m that kind of teacher. There they’d better do it right or else. It’s the only way to run [a classroom], I think, really.”

In 1922, when she was thirteen, Dione began to study cello in Paris at the Conservatoire, where Orrea was already studying violin. (That same year, the family moved to Paris because Margaret Wilson was ill, and France’s climate was considered more healthful than England’s.) After five years, however, Dione gave up her instrument in favor of cooking. “I was brought up in a family of artists and musicians, and although my love of music was important, it was secondary to my interest in cooking,” Dione wrote in the introduction to Creative Cooking, published in 1936 by her former student Nicholas Roosevelt. “I felt a strong urge at an early age to cook. Because my intelligent mother considered cooking one of the creative arts, I was encouraged to pursue my first love, and it has been a rewarding and satisfying experience.” So, at some point in the late 1920s, the still teenaged Dione took a series of cooking lessons at Le Cordon Bleu.

Dione’s Cordon Bleu credential is the cornerstone upon which she built her reputation, and there is no doubt she was a graduate. But some reported details about her time there are either unverifiable or inaccurate, causing some of her detractors to question the whole claim. What’s not in dispute is that the school, founded in 1895 by Mademoiselle Marthe Distel, was not nearly as rigorous as it became after 1945, when ownership passed to Madame Elisabeth Brassart.

When Dione was at Cordon Bleu, so was chef professor Henri-Paul Pellaprat, whose tenure extended from 1902 until 1932 (with an interruption for military service during World War I). It’s unclear, however, how long her course of study with him or others at the school lasted. The New Yorker profile says three weeks. A New York Times story from 1936 claims a less likely four years. Neither Catherine Baschet of the publicity department at Le Cordon Bleu Paris nor Lesley Gray, principal of Le Cordon Bleu London today and associated with the school since the 1960s, can provide specific dates. Baschet does confirm that the often repeated idea that Dione was the school’s first female graduate is incorrect “for sure.” Both Baschet and Gray confirm that a second young British woman, Rosemary Hume (1907–1984), studied at Cordon Bleu with Dione and the two later went into business together as cooking teachers in London.

Their partnership began in 1931, after either a Hume relative or friend put up the money. (In the interim, Dione is said to have served an apprenticeship at Restaurant Drouant. However, there are no details about her time at that Paris establishment where, Mark says, Dione took him once “to relive old times.”) The first address of Ecole du Petit Cordon Bleu, a name permitted by Monsieur Pellaprat, was
in Chelsea. Two years later, the pair, still in their early twenties, moved to Sloane Street and added a restaurant component. As a photo of the store front shows, it featured “Lessons in the Simple Cookery of France and the Continent,” along with “Hot Chocolate, Brioches, Coffee & Omelettes of all kinds.” Its interior was designed by an up-and-coming, Cambridge-educated architect named Colin Lucas (1906–1984), who had married Dione on April 9, 1930.

The Lucas family was more accomplished in the sciences than the arts favored by the Wilsons. Colin’s grandfather Francis was an engineer involved with laying the first transatlantic telecommunications cables. His father, Ralph, was an inventor who experimented with innovative automobiles. Another Colin grandfather and a great-great-grandfather were astronomers. Colin’s mother, Mary Anderson Juler Lucas, was a composer. She was also a follower of Russian philosopher P.D. Ouspensky (1878–1947) and introduced his teachings to her son. He in turn introduced them to Dione. This (the so-called cult mentioned by Dione’s detractors) was to play a crucial role in the young woman’s intellectual development.

Above: Dione Lucas treating the comedian Henry Morgan to a fluted mushroom on her TV cooking show Gourmet Club, aired on WPIX in the late 1950s.

The New Yorker profile says that in 1933 Dione and Hume returned to Cordon Bleu for another series of lessons designed to allow them to award Cordon Bleu diplomas to their students. Award these diplomas they did, with Monsieur Pellaprat’s permission, but Gray, who knew Hume and her family personally, says, “I do not believe Rosemary Hume returned to Paris for further training in 1933 as she was running her own school … and had a waiting list of students.”

It seems unlikely that Dione had the time or inclination for a return visit of her own that year. She gave birth to Mark in June. Dione and Hume, besides the school and restaurant, were undertaking weekly catering commissions. And they were writing a cookbook, *Au Petit Cordon Bleu: An Array of Recipes from the École du Petit Cordon Bleu, 29 Sloane Street, London*, published in 1936.

In any case, in 1937, Dione and Hume dissolved their partnership. The New Yorker says the strain of Dione’s
workload, coupled with motherhood, was the reason. However, Dione did not then commit herself to home and childrearing. In 1937–1938, Colin designed another restaurant for her, Au Petit Potager, on Wigmore Street. It never opened. War was coming, and Dione had the dubious idea of spending time in prewar Germany.

That Hitler story, repeatedly told about Dione (perhaps even by her initially), must derive from that experience. Its published source is Dione’s The Gourmet Cooking School Cookbook, written with Darlene Geis and published in 1964. “I do not mean to spoil your appetite for stuffed squab,” Dione’s commentary says, “but you might be interested to know that it was a great favorite of Mr. Hitler, who dined at the hotel often”—that is, the hotel where she says she worked.80

I asked Mark about what seem like apocrypha, included in Dione’s cookbook commentaries and elsewhere. “The more sensational stories, I’m never too sure about, including the squab one,” he said, recalling his mother did go to Germany during that period “for a holiday,” not for employment. (He remembers she “came back with those really chafing lederhosen shorts for Colin and me.”) But he never heard her tell the Hitler story to family or friends. “It may be that from time to time she was encouraged to dramatize or felt obliged to manufacture stories for drumming up publicity. My guess is she was very gullible when publicity needs loomed and in these situations tended to leave veracity well behind. Her TV patter got polished to a fine art form in my view, so yarns could certainly have spun impromptu. Maybe this tendency went a bit haywire when she was anxious and out of her depth. You see, she was not very sure of herself when out of the kitchen.”

Mark says he is generally put off by the cookbooks’ “often fanciful style and content,” which do not sound to him like his mother, perhaps because they were largely ghostwritten. Dione “was not a non-culinary writer,” he states. “In fact, I don’t remember her reading apart from newspapers; she wasn’t ‘into’ reading. So I wonder, now, whether she actually read (or even proofread) her books’ non-recipe parts?” He elaborates: “I think it’s quite likely that Dione wrote only the cookery parts. She was not a writer per se but an artist in cookery.”

Dione in America

In 1940, while Colin stayed behind to aid the war effort, Dione, pregnant with Peter, sailed for safety with Mark to Canada. Before the war, the young architect had joined the firm Connell and Ward (making it Connell, Ward and Lucas) and helped his colleagues create a series of influential houses in the International Modernist style. During the war, Mark recalls, his father was “advising about air-raid shelter construction in reinforced concrete.”

Dione and Mark lived in Ottawa with Colin’s uncle and aunt, Sir Gerald and Margaret Campbell, where Gerald was British High Commissioner. In previous years, the Campbells may even have introduced the couple.

Petur was born that December, “very premature indeed,” says Mark, “and initially thought by doctors to be destined for a hospitalized life with cerebral palsy. But to her great credit Dione never took institutionalization as an answer.” In 1941, when the Campbells were reassigned, to Washington DC, Dione and children did not go with them. Instead, they headed to New York, where the Campbells had been posted from 1931 through 1938, so perhaps they had connections for Dione. In any event, there she began to find employment.

Using her talented hands, she fluted mushrooms by the hour in a window of the restaurant Longchamps. According to the New Yorker, she also taught cooking at a place called Scientific Housekeeping. In March 1942, she gave cooking classes sponsored by the New York Junior League. She was not teaching French cuisine. “Junior League Will Provide Emergency Meal Training. Course Will Be Conducted by Mrs. Dione Lucas, Graduate of Cordon Bleu Cooking School in Paris” is the headline of the New York Times story that announced the series.82

In the summer of 1942, Dione was hired to cook for Hope Williams (1897–1990), a wealthy Broadway actress, popular in the 1920s and 1930s, who divided her time between a 1,000-acre dude ranch in Wyoming and her Upper East Side apartment.83 Mark says: “I remember [the ranch] very well and had a wonderful time with a pony plus Levis, Peewee boots, cowboy hat, and shirt, provided by Hope at a Cody outfitters. [I was] set free on the ranch at the foot of the Rockies while Dione catered almost single-handed for maybe a dozen or so cowboys and ranch hands (breakfast at five), then dude ranch staff breakfast, followed eventually by breakfast for the debutantes. And so on through the day!”

Early that fall, Dione opened her Cordon Bleu Restaurant and Cooking School at 117 East Sixtieth Street, on the ground floor of a three-story brownstone in Williams’s neighborhood. The New Yorker account says Williams and a friend financed the place, whose specialty was omelets. It was a wise choice: eggs were cheap, omelets were still exotic in America, and Dione could show off her manual dexterity, as she made them right in front of the customers. The magazine also
saying Williams’s theatrical circle were her regulars until the restaurant was discovered by others. It seems plausible that Williams or one of her show-business connections introduced Dione to those who would eventually put her on TV. They may also have been her connection to the publishing world. In 1948, her first solo book, *The Cordon Bleu Cook Book*, came out with Little, Brown.

Dione’s TV show was called “To the Queen’s Taste.” It continued for a year or so with its name changed to a less regal one, “The Dione Lucas Cooking Show.” That was followed by “The Dione Lucas Hour” and “Gourmet Club,” broadcast to approximately sixty cities across the United States. She was off to an auspicious start. What better evidence than a 1949 cover of the *New Yorker* depicting men in a bar hunched over their drinks while on the TV screen above them a dark-haired woman looking very much like Dione stirs something in a bowl? During that same period, however, Dione’s personal life deteriorated. While Dione worked, Peter was being cared for by a Long Island family, of either German or Austrian extraction, who “took in children with special needs, perhaps three or four others, I guess,” Mark says.”

In 1944, when Mark was eleven, he returned to England to live with Colin. After the war, father, son, and Dione were briefly reunited in New York. “But the two were not happy together,” says Mark. “They were so different—and it didn’t work out. Colin, just for example, had a very delicate digestion from childhood, so Cordon Bleu cuisine upset him. He was quite shy and liked a quiet lifestyle.” Before the decade was over, they divorced.

“I think both parents did their respective utmost to provide some sort of family environment in the very difficult situations that came up,” Mark opines. “I mean, the rupture of wartime, their basic incompatibility, and of course Peter’s dire physical situation. You see, they were both remarkably gifted human beings… Having said that, I should add that actually, in spite of everything, we were all exceptionally close and understood perfectly well the realities of the situation.”

Even with a good support system in place, Dione’s workload would have taken a toll. Mark says his mother “often kept working through several days and nights.” A perfectionist, too—“everything had to be just right; that was her impossible, professional aim.” There was no time for recreation. She “didn’t really switch off, except perhaps in air-conditioned New York cinemas in a heat wave, for example—embarrassing for a nine-year-old, as she could really snore, but I knew she needed the sleep. (I had to sink invisibly low in the seat!)”

It wasn’t just the pace that taxed her. Not “gifted financially” as Mark puts it, she “could not add sums, nor therefore was she able to think about financial debts and credits in the usually accepted way.” Her lack of business acumen was, in Mark’s opinion, another result of her artistic upbringing and outlook. “Her focus was always on perfecting her art, and money didn’t enter into it.” As a result, pocketbook problems inevitably dogged her. Press reports of the period refer to her living and teaching in her apartment at 1 West Seventy-second Street—the Dakota. Mark confirms the posh address. “Yes, she had a huge flat in the Dakota, with other celebrities thereabouts. Don’t know how she managed it, but maybe it was at her financial peak.”

The one extracurricular Dione did find time for was lectures by Ouspensky. She often spent weekends with thirty or so other followers in Mendham, New Jersey, where he had retreated during the war. (He handpicked the Mendham group from audiences in Manhattan, where he was initially based after leaving London.) Ouspensky, who studied the Gurdjieff System under George Gurdjieff, taught his own System of self-mastery by means of which partakers sought a higher dimension of existence. He also taught concepts called “recurrence” and “self-remembering,” which were considered aids for seekers of the “fourth” dimension. Those who did achieve the goal would not be confined to time and space as we know it, or so taught the author of (the perhaps aptly titled) *In Search of the Miraculous*.

Mark says his mother exercised her intellect with that group, but just as important to her well-being was its camaraderie: “[It] sustained her during her otherwise somewhat solitary career in the U.S.” It was her “center of gravity—and friendship—in a very professionally driven life.” He recalls other members of the group being Mary Norton, author of *The Borrowers*, and Pamela Travers, author of *Mary Poppins*. Apparently, children as well as children’s-book authors were welcome: Mark remembers the farm as “a delightful country spot to roam about when young.” Dione also did some cooking for the group, says Mark, characterizing her as “a mainstay of the weekend catering arrangements.”

Friendships with colleagues back in New York, meanwhile, were not being forged easily. On June 8, 1953, after being a dinner guest at Dione’s apartment, James Beard described the evening in a letter to his friend Helen Evans Brown as “strange and wonderful,” then dissected the menu ("We started with the most indifferent bits of bread with smoked salmon"), before he got down to the real business—his dubious impressions of and gossip about the behavior and personal life of his host:

She ate nothing but watched every bite I took. And she questioned me later about leaving a small piece of fish on the plate. She fell asleep in
the drawing room. She does all the shows I told you about and then is away on weekends to cook for eighty people in some religious cult. It is her salvation she is working on. I am told she not only cooks for two days for these eighty people but that she buys all the food out of her own pocket as well.\(^45\)

But Beard, whose own attempt at being a cooking-show personality hadn't succeeded, couldn't decide whether he was more fascinated than exasperated by Dione.\(^46\) On December 16, 1953, after another dinner at her place, he wrote to Brown that Dione had proposed a collaboration and he was "giving it thought and wondering what would happen." It would combine classes and a restaurant, like Dione's other hybrid in New York and, earlier, in London. "Of course," Beard added, "the announcement of my name and Dione's together, in certain circles, would be like news of the Monitor and the Merrimac battle."\(^47\)

Above: The New Yorker cover from January 29, 1949, showing Dione Lucas on her television cooking show.

The collaboration never occurred, but as Beard continued to dine at Dione's, his feelings toward her softened. "Had dinner at Dione's on Friday," he wrote to Brown on February 21, 1961. "She doesn't sit, which embarrasses the hell out of me." And in describing the dinner this time he complained that every course heavily relied on cream: "creamed sauce," "creamy dressing," "very creamy cheese," "whipped cream"... "But I am fond of her," he admitted, "and wish I could perform with my hands as she does."\(^48\)

When Ouspensky died, steeped in controversy, having returned to England after questioning his System himself, the widowed Madame Sophia Grigorievna Ouspensky carried on in New Jersey until her own death in 1961. Dione
must have keenly felt the loss, but by then she had made some New York friends in Gorman (a student of hers beginning in 1959) and Gorman’s husband, Lionel H. Braun. Fifteen years younger than Dione, Gorman became Dione’s protege and enlisted Lionel to help Dione with her “tangled business affairs.” And there was something else new to consider: a successor to her TV cooking-show crown.

When The French Chef debuted on February 11, 1963, Dione’s shows were no longer on TV, and their memory quickly faded as audiences—many times larger than they were at Dionce’s peak—embraced the big woman and her warm personality. Julia, erudite but effervescent, had a brand of humor much more appealing to Americans than Dione’s. (Julia, when asked why she massaged butter into a chicken before roasting, answered, “The chicken seems to like it.” Dione, while preparing a Christmas plum pudding, instructed, “Get every member of your family to stir it three times clockwise and make a wish and it will come true, but it must be clockwise.”) Both obviously loved cooking, but Julia simply had more fun. One can also see how eagerly she anticipated cooking’s logical conclusion: eating. Dione often kissed her fingers, pronouncing a thing “delayshuss,” but it’s easier to imagine her cleaning up afterward than sitting down to enjoy the dishes she prepared.

The Last Course

“How do you doooo and welcome to my beeeyoutiful gas kitchen,” is how Dione greeted TV audiences when her sponsor was Caloric ranges in the mid-1950s. “Those were the days [when] we had to paint our lips bright blue for the camera,” she reminisced to a reporter years after her TV career was over. Those were also the days when a studio’s primitive camera arrangements often forced her to speak over her shoulder as she tended something at the stove. Those who chance to catch one of her shows, sometimes aired on food-themed cable stations as classics, will see that her directions were excruciatingly precise. “Break the eggs smartly and keenly,” she says to begin her signature omelet. “You need a good strong left arm,” she admonishes, since her technique requires alternating between vigorous shaking of the pan and fork-stirring of the egg mixture. “We don’t necessarily want to be a quick and speedy cook—we want to be a good one,” she advises generally. The thought comes after a silence far longer than contemporary TV watchers are accustomed. Low on chitchat, she is not attempting to entertain; she is teaching, only teaching.

While she began with French cooking, she later featured other Continental cuisines as well as such traditional American family dishes as roast turkey with stuffing. Making gravy for turkey with port wine gives it “a lovely, rich, dark-brown color,” Dione notes on that episode. “Serve it with good French bread to dunk into it,” she suggests, which sounds scrumptious, but there’s no time for savoring the idea. To carve the turkey, she instructs somewhat sternly, “The knife must be veddy, veddy sharp, able to split a hair!”

A typed, multiple-page list, preserved in Dione’s files at the Schlesinger, shows she prepared two dishes per episode, main dish and dessert: ravioli and sponge cake; shrimp curry and peach flan; sauerbraten and chocolate log; trout amandine and eclairs; beef stroganoff and baklava; spaghetti with meatballs and blueberry pie; gefilte fish and pineapple upside-down cake; beef tongue with spinach puree and banana-cream pie; chicken pie and angel-food cake; eggs Benedict and mont blanc au marrons; lamb kidneys en brochette and strawberry Singapore… One has to wonder if producers, with an eye on ratings among 1950s suburban housewives, influenced some of these choices. In any case, in episodes I have seen, Dione never talked down to her audience. She expected of them the same rigor that her father had expected of her.

In 1955, Little, Brown and Co. published The Dione Lucas Meat and Poultry Cook Book, written with Ann Roe Robbins, and then signed Dione to another book contract in 1958. It remained unfinished while she continued to teach and work at restaurants, including The Egg Basket and Gingerman in New York; Four Chimneys and The Brasserie in Bennington, Vermont, her sister Orrea’s home; and Heritage Village Restaurant in Southbury, Connecticut—her frequent relocations having been prompted by illness. But there must have been enough of a recovery for her to attempt her comeback in 1970.

At that time, Gorman and Braun were working with her to fulfill the old book contract. In a letter of August 31, 1971, Gorman asked Dione to supply “little notes or memories” about each recipe to be included. “We need hundreds of little sentences like this to scatter throughout the book,” she wrote. Other letters show the book was a struggle that Dione eventually abandoned to Gorman and Braun. Apparently undeterred, the couple was encouraging Dione to commit to other book projects. Gorman suggested that Dione “take the best of provincial French cooking and adapt it for the young generation (today’s 20–30 year olds). Nobody of your stature has done this. Dione, it really is
a ‘need’ and not just a gimmick as so many cookbooks are today.” Another of the couple’s ideas was for a book about healthy French cooking.15

In both 1970 and 1971, however, Dione underwent surgeries for cancer, and on or about September 27, 1971, she sailed for England on the S.S. France in order to be closer to Mark. A letter she wrote to Gorman about three weeks later says she was having “awful cobalt treatment[s], which makes you feel extremely sick and has many nasty side effects.” She was also having trouble adjusting: “It is very different living over here and suddenly coming out of a place one has been used to for the last thirty years.” Still, she believed that work would save her: “I feel very lost at the moment; but as soon as I can get really going with the [provincial French cooking] book I feel all this will sort itself out.”15

Gorman replied forcefully and at length within a few weeks of Dione’s death: “… dear Dione, will you please read again the concept we wrote for this book… Will you please, please write down all of the information requested… Think of your daughter-in-law, or my secretary… and write a recipe that they can understand and follow… I do miss you very much. You are one of the most inspiring and talented persons on this earth.”15

On October 10, 2010, what would have been his mother’s 101st birthday, Mark sent me his favorite photograph of Bleu about 1942

Mark also says that his father “reformulated” Ouspensky’s System “in the light of insights he gained from his family meditation practice.” He added that even his brother, Peter, had “benefited a good deal from learning the family meditation technique” and that Dione’s father “was on a similar track, but didn’t have time to catch the same train.” The Ouspensky chapter in Dione’s family’s life may well be worth mining by another writer closer to the source materials in England and elsewhere.

Dione used to sign off her TV program with “Good-bye and God bless you all!” It startled me the first time I heard it. (Quite a contrast to Julia’s “Bon appétit!”) But, says Mark, “I am sure it was genuine and heartfelt. She absorbed a devotional approach to Christian artifacts via her father’s life and work. She was deeply religious in the real sense of the word, which implies in the root ‘religare’ a reuniting with, in this case, the divine center in oneself and through that with everyone and everyday.”

NOTES
3. Barbara Kafka, “She could be actively dislikable,” Watching What We Eat, 58.
4. Kathleen Collins, Watching What We Eat, 72.
8. Ibid.
10. mc 601, Box 7, File 7.14, letter to Peter and Mark Lucas from Gorman, 4 March 1995.
11. mc 601, Box 7, File 7.1.
12. In that reminiscence, Dione claims to have been housekeeper for Rose (1899-1966). “He asked me to live with him in his penthouse, but I didn’t. I think if I had he might have left me a lot of money, but he didn’t. One of my jobs was to see that each of his girl friends, he would have as many as five a night, did not meet the other ones coming or going…” mc 601, Box 82, on Dione Lucas stationery, no date.
13. mc 601, Box 2, File 82.5.
15. Mark Lucas email to author, 15 May 2010. All subsequent quotations are from our email correspondence.
18. When Dione’s sister launched her career as violinist, she discovered there already was a violinist named Pernel Wilson, so she changed her name.
19. Manton, Henry Wilson, 84.
21. Ibid.
22. Manton, Henry Wilson, 6, n. 24.
25. MC 601, Box 7, File 42.5, typescript of interview with Lucas by Deane, 22.
26. Roosevelt was attached to the American Embassy in Paris, secretary to the American mission in Spain and vice-governor of the Philippine Islands. His father was first cousin to Teddy Roosevelt. Copies of his book are scarce. I read the Schlesinger’s copy. It belonged and was inscribed to Paul and Julia Child. Regarding Dione’s family: in addition to her sculptor father and violinist sister Orrea, her sister Fiammetta (1904–1940) was a weaver and her mother was an embroiderer. Her brother (1902–1955) was a civil engineer. Manton, Henry Wilson, 127.
28. The New Yorker says it was a branch of the school, on Rue de la Pompe.
32. Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, entry on Rosemary Hume by Paul Levy, says it was a family friend; Lesley Gray, in an 18 August 2010 email, says “the money was offered as a loan by an elderly member of her family.”
35. Lesley Gray email to author, 19 August 2010.
36. It has often been written that both catering clients and students of Hume and Dione were royalty, including the Prince of Wales. Mark Lucas says, “Don’t know about the aristocrats, though Dione spoke of providing a picnic for the Archbishop of Canterbury.”
38. At any rate, it was closed during World War II. At war's end, Constance Spyro bought into it, and she and Hume ran it as co-principals. The school was renamed the Constance Spyro Cordon Bleu School of Cookery. In 1990, it was bought by Le Cordon Bleu.
39. See Wikipedia entry on Dione Lucas, also, Time, 6 August 2009. Since Hitler was reportedly a vegetarian, the story is often trotted out to refute that idea.
41. The New Yorker profile notes that in Dione’s first book, The Cordon Bleu Cook Book, published in 1947, she wrote “feuillet de sole en papillotes” instead of “feuillet de sole en papillotes” and Tallyrand instead of Talleyrand, among other mistakes. There are continuity problems in at least one other book. Julia annotated them in her copy of The Dione Lucas Book of French Cooking, part of the collection at the Schlesinger Library. One example: “It is always best to knead dough by hand, never with a machine or a spoon,” the book states on one page, then on the facing page: “Beat the dough thoroughly with a hand or electric mixer.” That book, however, was posthumously published in 1973 by Dione’s cousin Maron Gorman.
44. “[Peter] did have a trial go living in London later, but it didn’t work.” As mentioned, he later moved to Bennington where, Mark says, thanks to Orrea, he “spent many happy years,” even marrying twice.
46. On August 30, 1946, Beard’s “I Love to Eat” aired for 15 minutes, “the first cooking program in the history of television,” according to The Solace of Food: The Life of James Beard by Robert Clark (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1999), 122.
47. Beard, Love and Kisses, 30.
48. Ibid., 283.
49. MC 601, Box 7, File 17, 14.
51. MC 601, Box 7, File 22.11.
52. MC 601, Box 7, File 17.1.
53. When The Dione Lucas Book of French Cooking was published posthumously in 1973 with Gorman billed as co-author, it became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, but reviews were mixed. Mimi Sheraton, for one, complained that at 900 pages it was way too big and also misnamed, since not all of it was French. Whatever one’s opinion of it, it’s debatable how much of it actually came from Dione. Debatable, too, is how much of what Gorman and Braun did for Dione was purely business rather than friendship. For many reasons, it would have been illuminating to speak to them, but I was unable to locate either one (they divorced in the early 1970s) or any descendants.
54. The provincial one never appeared, but in 1977, Dutton published The Dione Lucas Book of Natural French Cooking by Marion Gorman and Felipe P de Alba. It recasts Dione’s classics as health foods, to dubious effect—for example, her Chocolate Roullage Leontine was turned into Dione’s Chocolate Roll with Carob. Regarding “roulage,” it’s actually a roulade, but Dione insisted on spelling it her way.
55. MC 601, Box 7, File 17.1.
56. MC 601, Box 7, File 17.1.
57. The Movements to Music are today known as The Gurdjieff Movements, consisting of both music and dance. For more information, see www.gurdjieff-heritage-society.org.