

[Food for Thought (Series): Ep. 1 The Legacy of French Cooking]

Intro: You're listening to *Death and Numbers*, a podcast created by the Humanities Media Project in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin. Today we crack open two cookbooks to ask: **when did French cuisine become synonymous with fine dining?**

Introductory music - theme "music" of Julia & Jacques cooking at home

A: I'm Amy Vidor.

C: And I'm Caroline Barta.

A: This episode explores questions Caroline and I often ask each other, such as: How can collaboration impact the success of a project? How can learning benefit from shared labor?

C: Our first episode in the series, "Food for Thought," examines how food writing shapes cultural transmission. For today's story, we begin in 1651...

[Pause]

A: ...with the publication of *Le Vray Cuisinier François (The French Cook)* by François Pierre de la Varenne.

C: La Varenne's cookbook established modern French cuisine and helped launch the home cook. In his preface, La Varenne writes, (quote) *Dear Reader, in recompense all that I would ask of you is that my book be for you as pleasurable as it is useful* (unquote).

A: La Varenne presents a shocking concept for the 17th century reader: the notion of cooking as **fun**. The wording of the preface signals that La Varenne may have written this book to encourage cooking as a leisure activity, rather than a professional endeavor.

[Pause]

C: What changes with La Varenne, and those that follow him, is access. Before the 1600s, cooking was a carefully protected set of skills, monitored by guilds. Like labor unions today, guilds regulated numerous trades. Unlike today, these trades tended to be passed on by oral tradition.

A: Guilds also organized apprenticeships, standardized membership, encouraged collaboration, and placed members in positions. Because trades had complex social rules, socio-economic status was also a limiting force upon one's career.

C: La Varenne, a commoner, began as an apprentice in a local kitchen. Eventually, he rose to the rank of kitchen clerk, which meant he was responsible for an entire aristocratic household's food service. That he had this role was exceptional, as the rank of kitchen clerk was traditionally reserved for nobility.

A: La Varenne's humble roots, and unprecedented success, inspired him to share his passion with a general public. In placing his acquired knowledge in a sustainable, replicable form in the printed book, Varenne circumvented time-honored traditions of gaining information. By presenting professional secrets to an open marketplace, this cookbook suggested cooking was within reach for whomever had the means to purchase the book. Over the years, this type of print instruction would replace oral transmission and contribute to the decline of the guild system.

C: *The French Cook* contains over eight-hundred recipes divided by courses, soups and broths, starters, second course, and small dishes. Previous medieval recipe collections often bundled together medicinal cures and homemade remedies alongside recipes. This led to the line between potion and pudding being quite thin. Additionally, the recipes for food in these collections tend toward discussion of how best to preserve or extend the use of foodstuff.

A: It also indicated a shift from cooking as purely for sustenance, instead emphasizing the development of flavors. He eliminated overly complex preparations in favor of reasonable meals worth eating. Cooking became accessible.

C: Compared to medieval French cooking, Varenne's book popularized seasonal and taste-based dishes. By introducing dishes like omelettes and bisques, and teaching readers to build flavors through bouillons and sauces like béchamels, *The French Cook* helped transition France away from an Italian-style of cooking. This meant seasoning dishes with shallots or onions, in lieu of expensive imported spices. Using locally-sourced ingredients in a recognizably "French-style" reinforced a sense of transferable cultural heritage, connected to ways of preparing food.

A: But we're getting ahead of ourselves. La Varenne's legacy relies both on its place in the history of cookbooks, and on its relationship to the history of print. While moveable type dated back to Gutenberg's printing press in the 1440s, the 17th century encouraged the spread of print culture as general costs went down. Texts could be more easily exchanged, copied, and even translated for travel across the channel, especially as cities such as Paris and Amsterdam served as printing hubs.

C: Curator at the British Library, Polly Russell, explains that within seventy-five years, *The French Cook* had been reprinted thirty times across Europe. Translated into English in 1653, the book was marketed to (quote) *every private family, even to the husband-man or labouring-man, wheresoever the English tongue is, or may be used* (unquote). Considering England's status at the time as the cultural backwater of Western Europe, the rapid arrival of La Varenne's book to England signals its interest beyond its original context.

A: Long after La Varenne's death, *The French Cook* remained an international bestseller. French cooks turned to La Varenne's manual for instruction and inspiration until the French Revolution.

C: By the mid-1700s, food shortages affected France's political and social stability. With the dissolution of French aristocracy in 1789, chefs who had worked for noble estates were left without employment. Additionally, as people—primarily men--moved from the countryside into Paris seeking work, they were left without family members to prepare food for them.

A: The solution? Chefs migrated with the changing population to the city, and began opening “restaurants.” This novel concept aimed to replicate the experience of a “family-style” meal for the increasingly consumer culture of the 1800s. Restaurants quickly spread across the Atlantic, with the first restaurant “à la française” opening in Boston in 1794.

C: For the duration of the 18th and 19th centuries, the concept of professional chef remained predominantly masculine. Meanwhile, the responsibility to feed the masses increasingly fell to women.

A: Women took on cooking as a primary domestic duty, not as skilled and paid labor. As the world became more industrialized, alternating periods of technological advancement and significant violent conflicts generally meant that the process of cooking prioritized expediency and nutrition over the potential experience of an elaborate meal.

A few more seconds of Julia & Jacques cooking at home

C: Turning the everyday chore of cooking back into an educational--but nonetheless pleasurable experience, La Varenne’s paradox--would prove challenging, especially in 1950s America. The post-War generation was enamored with modern culinary marvels--convenient and cost-effective processed foods (think frozen TV dinners and Jell-O) and time-saving kitchen appliances like refrigerators and electric mixers.

A: Enter Julia Child, one of the authors of the other **French** cookbook on our table today, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Whether known from a well-loved family volume of her books, or from her recent Hollywood treatment by Meryl Streep in 2009’s *Julie and Julia*, Julia Child remains a beloved food icon in modern-day America.

A: Child helped introduce the idea of gourmet home cooking for modern audiences. Rather than settling for convenience, she advocated for cooking as a meticulous process that allowed room for error and fostered hospitality. She revived interest in taste over function, preaching the value of simple, local ingredients and flavors developed with care and attention.

C: It might be surprising to learn that Child did not develop an interest in cooking when she was young. Part of this delay can be attributed to the fact that her parents employed a house cook. She did not have the nostalgia of cooking alongside family members. Instead, her interest in food was rooted in the warm relationship she had with her husband, Paul, and the cultural opportunities afforded to her by his career in the foreign service.

[Pause]

A: While her husband was stationed in Paris, Child decided to attend *Le Cordon Bleu*. Shortly after she met French chefs Simone, better known as Simca, Beck and Louise Bertholle at Le Cercle des Gourmettes, a culinary club for women in Paris. Child’s eventual bestseller, co-written with Simone Beck, drew inspiration from her close friendships with these women.

C: [aside: previous to meeting Child, Beck and Bertholle had wanted to write a French cookbook for English speakers, but lacked the language skills to execute the project well].

A: In 1952, the women started L'École des Trois Gourmandes [The School of the Three Gourmandes], an informal "school" for American women living in Paris to learn about French cuisine. The lessons were held in Child's kitchen.

C: Although the lessons stopped in 1953 when Child moved to Marseille, their collaboration was the foundation for *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, a 734-page encyclopedic cookbook published in 1961.

A: In effect, this trio had translated the collaborative kitchen environment developed over centuries in France for home cooks across the world. They created a systemized text to train the next generation of home cooks, which continued the cultural exchange began by La Varenne in 1651. Perhaps then, it should come as no surprise that Child had two 1712 editions of La Varenne's *The French Cook* among her collection of 5,000 cookbooks.

[Pause]

C: Once again, a chef's decision to share knowledge with the world, using the medium of a book, inspired generations to attempt "professional" skills from the comfort of their home kitchen. Rapidly, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* was translated into numerous languages including Finnish, Danish, Chinese, and Spanish and a second volume was ordered for 1970.

A: Of course, not all translations went smoothly. Perhaps the most controversial "translation" was into British English. In a letter dated November 6, 1975, editor Carol Brown Janeway recalled, (quote) *Julia has always been very dissatisfied with what [British editors] did...they entirely changed the layout of the book which reduced to nonsense her whole method of teaching recipes* (unquote). For the translation of the second volume, letters between Child and her editor, Judith Jones, reveal her demands that British editors only convert measurements and ingredient terms, but remain faithful to the original layout.

[Pause]

C: The approachable method to cooking was easily adapted into different mediums. Child signed on for a cooking show, *The French Chef*, premiering in 1963. The show lasted a decade, attracting fans who appreciated Child's unfiltered style. Back then, live television was not on a delay, so when Child made a mistake, the film kept rolling.

A: The recipes were also reprinted for other publications. In 1970, McCall's, the first magazine for women, purchased rights to serialize selected recipes from the *Mastering the Art of French Cooking: Volume 2*. Off limits for reprinting, however, was the treasured French bread recipe--sacrosanct for Child.

[Pause]

Child making French bread

[Pause]

C: Making something as iconic as French bread approachable was about more than just the recipe for Beck, Bertholle, and Child--it was about inviting American cooks to experience French culture in their home. In its continuing legacy, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* invites its reader to cook and share a cultural experience in community.

When Beck passed away in 1991, Child reminisced (quote) *We were like sisters...We were a pair of cooking nuts. She was a wonderful and generous friend. We called her La Super Française, because she was so French* (unquote).

[Pause]

A: Today, French cuisine remains synonymous not only with fine dining, but also with traditions fostered in kitchens over the past four centuries. For many Americans, “French” cooking conjures the image of the statuesque (and boisterous) Child, often forgetting her French collaborators. Yet, La Varenne’s contribution to modern tastes and habits--whether it be the desire to “cook local” or obsess over flavors, places the beginning of the textual revolution of our taste buds far earlier. The next time you make a béchamel sauce, or opt for an in-season vegetable, friendly to your locale, don’t just reach for one book. Think about another instead. Julia certainly did.

OUTRO: This has been *Death and Numbers*, a podcast created and produced by the Humanities Media Project in the College of Liberal Arts at UT-Austin and **Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services**. We are Amy Vidor and Caroline Barta. Notes for the show, including links and photos can be found on our website, humanities media project dot org. Our theme music is “Enthusiast” by Tours. Thank you for listening.