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Slice of History

By Karen Grigsby Bates
Refrigerators, Fast Food, Microwaves—a Pioneering Tastemaker Reflects on All That Has Changed American Eating Over the Century by Julia Child

From the reign of meat and potatoes to the sushi-and-salsa '90s, America has undergone several revolutions in taste—and few people have done more to liberate the nation's palate than Julia Child. Born in 1912 to a well-heeled Pasadena, Calif., family, Child grew up consuming the plain, hearty cuisine that had sustained generations of Americans. But she had a revelation when, as foreign-service officer Paul Child's new bride, she sat down to her first meal in France in 1948. She enrolled in Paris's Cordon Bleu cooking school in 1949, then set out to share her passion with a postwar America awash in such dubious innovations as frozen TV dinners and boxed macaroni-and-cheese mixes. Child triumphed. Mastering the Art of French Cooking, written with two French friends and published in 1961, has sold more than a million copies and remains a perennial favorite. And her TV series—starting in 1963 with *The French Chef*—made an icon of the 6'2" cook with the breezy stoveside manner and throaty "Bon appétit!" sign-off.

Despite her 86 years, Child's appetite for life remains sharp. She recently taped her latest PBS series, *Julia and Jacques: Cooking at Home*, with chef Jacques Pepin. As active as ever, she attributes her longevity to eating "a little bit of everything, all in moderation"—although she admits to regularly downing "loads of bacon" at breakfast. As part of PEOPLE'S look at the past century with the help of those who shaped it, L.A. correspondent Karen Grigsby Bates spoke with Child about American cuisine and how it has changed.

When I was young, we always had good food at home, but it was good, plain New England food, the kind my mother had back in Massachusetts when she was growing up. We always had a soup course, meat and vegetables. Things like roast beef and leg of lamb, which was cooked till it was well-done in those days—it was still good, juicy and nice—with roast potatoes and mint sauce. We certainly didn't have one-stop shopping; supermarkets hadn't been invented yet. We'd usually telephone orders to our neighborhood grocery. The milkman delivered milk—in bottles. The vegetable man didn't have a lot of fancy vegetables, but you got nice farm vegetables in season. We didn't have a lot of canned foods unless they had been preserved at home. Until I was about 15, we didn't have a refrigerator, just an icebox, so that dictated what we could buy and how long we could keep it. We put it on the porch so when the ice melted, the water ran out through the floorboards.

My mother didn't cook very much—only on Thursdays, when the maid was off. We ate together around 6:30 p.m., when my father was home. And unless there was a party, there wasn't any drinking. We never had wine.

I certainly remember when this frenzy for frozen food came in after World War II. People were very excited about it because it was new. And then there was Duncan Hines and the cake mixes; people used them a lot. In the '40s and '50s, the home economists were never mentioning anything about taste or flavor. They considered a meal okay as long as it had the right amount of nutrients. That's all they cared about. They'd say frozen green beans were the same as fresh, which is ridiculous. They're not at all, not in terms of taste, anyway.

Then people got tired of eating that way—at least some did—and cooking was really very much "in" for a short period in the 1960s. That was before women started going to work in such large numbers. There were many educated women who were unemployed or underemployed, and cooking was something they could do and enjoy. I think many people stopped doing that kind of cooking in the '80s, when there was so much takeout going on. Now people seem to be doing more cooking again. Women cook as a hobby, and more men are starting to do it—I think men take pride in cooking well. TV food shows may have sparked some of the renaissance. Now we have cooks as personalities.

The invention of the electric mixer [popularized in the 1930s] was a milestone. When I think of all the hand-beating we did before that! It was good for your arms, though. The food processor is also extremely useful for making pie dough, kneading bread, all that slicing and dicing. It's the essential machine for really fine cooking. I remember I was one of the first people to have one in the '70s. I think the microwave [the compact was introduced for home use in 1967] is very useful. In the beginning, they were very expensive, but now most American kitchens have them.

When I was a child, we were encouraged to eat a lot. Dieting really got big in the '60s, when fashion models were very thin. They weren't always, you know! Now, we're eating all this fat-free, fake stuff, and we're getting fat anyway because we're not satisfied. If you asked me years ago what one of my favorite things to eat was, I'd have said a great loin strip steak, but it's really very hard to get a great steak anymore. The marbling used to be marvelous. Now, there's no fat. People are afraid of sugars too. We're drinking more diet sodas than ever, and they're making our sweet tooth harder to satisfy, because they're overly sweet.

We didn't know many vegetarians years ago. Not eating meat became the thing to do some places in the '60s, but the movement is much bigger in the '90s. Personally, I don't think pure vegetarianism is a healthy lifestyle. It's more fear of food—that whole thing that red meat is bad for you. And then there are people who don't eat meat because it's against their morals. Well, there's nothing you can do with people like that. I've often wondered to myself: Does a vegetarian look forward to dinner, ever?

I don't think we were as afraid of food in the early days, except for pesticides. I do take some steps—I wash everything I eat in hot water, which will wash away anything clinging to it better than cold. But there's so much cultism clinging to the fear of pesticides. Now there's worry about irradiation and bio-engineering, but I think the critics are often short on facts.

When I was young, it was an occasion to eat out. There was a whole ceremony involved: The waiter explained the menu, there was wine. More casual restaurants and the chains and such started up in the mid-'60s, and entire families could go out to eat regularly—although the quality of what we were eating is another discussion. Too much fried food!

There are many more ethnic restaurants today, especially in big cities. Our palates are now wider, more sophisticated. Farmers' markets and organic markets have also spurred large stores to be better—my local Star Market in Cambridge has a wonderful produce section. Part of it is the ongoing need to excite our taste buds—Americans don't like to be bored. And part is the inevitable result of globalization. Our world is getting smaller, and we've become much more adventurous in our quest for good things to eat.

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