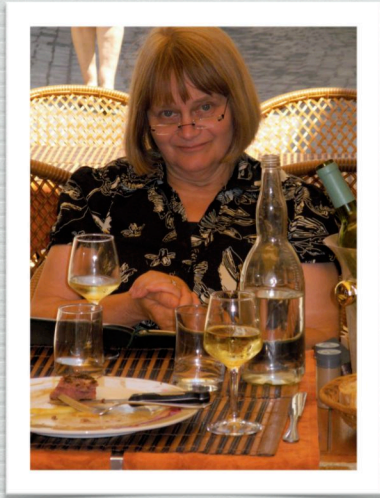


# Le Cordon Bleu

An Adventure in Paris





## About this book

This book chronicles my escapade at the Cordon Bleú attempting to follow in the footsteps of Julia Child. In my subsequent research I tripped over the illusive revelation that Julia Child actually forced American women into a culinary servitude not shared by French cuisiniers. .



# Le Cordon Bleu

15th Arrondissement  
Paris, France



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I was almost feeling like a Parisian. Or perhaps more accurately, I was feeling like an “ex-pat”. My husband and I were squeezed into a Montparnasse studio apartment, so like true Parisians, (and ex-pats) we were hanging out in public places, the parks, cafes, bistros and restaurants. The ones frequented by the likes of Earnest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein. My “ex-pat” role model was Julia Child who defined her early years in France as being the best in her life. In her memoir [My Life in France](#) she spoke of her those years as “a crucial period of transformation in which I found my true calling, experienced an awakening of the senses, and had such fun that I hardly

stopped moving long enough to catch my breath.” Julia’s attendance at the cooking school Le Cordon Bleu was central to her experiences in Paris, her subsequent career and fame. She enrolled on an impulse, chose a career path never attempted by a woman and went on to inform American women of the joys of french cooking. Fifty years later, through the magic of the Internet, I was enrolled at the Cordon Bleu. It was only a one day class but I felt I had arrived! The class that I elected to take was described by the Cordon Bleu brochure as the Paris Market Tour “Two hour walking visit of one of the most beautiful markets with Le Cordon Bleu chef and return to the school for a light lunch and demonstration”.

It seemed a great adventure when I first planned it, safely ensconced in my California home. But when the day dawned it was like the first day of grade school. Although my husband is happy to enjoy the meat and potatoes of my labors, he is indifferent to the process, classifying cooking as “something women do”. I was going this one alone. Naturally I became mired in the practical details. How would I get there? You’d think it would be easy; I was in the 14<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement, the school was in the 15<sup>th</sup>. Not so, it was very tricky, with transfers from one line to another involving two different stations. I dutifully charted the course using my Paris Pratique Par Arrondissement.

Feeling as if I was going off to war, I kissed my husband goodbye. We agreed to meet at a bar across from the Gare Denfert-Rochereau. This Gare is the oldest railway station in Paris, built in 1840. It must have been the rendez-vous spot for lovers returning from the Franco-Prussian War, World War I and World War II. It seemed most fitting and almost romantic!



I reached my destination; my extensive preparation paid off. I found the school without difficulty but it didn't look anything like it was supposed to. It was a nondescript building in the middle of a nondescript street. A small sign in the window said "Le Cordon Bleu", so this had to be it. One Cordon Bleu attendee researched the history of the school and discovered that the building formerly housed a medical clinic: the large clinical operating theaters were transformed into demonstration kitchens.

I climbed the dingy staircase, early, as any self-respecting eager student should be. But upon being ushered to a second floor room I found about ten people had already gathered. It was a disappointing collection, seemingly just simple folk, husbands and wives clumping together, hesitant not at all eager. The men were clad in wind-breakers and hush-puppies; the women in sensible shoes and the signaturematron hairdo, short in the sides and back, permed on the top. They appeared neither curious nor enthused. It was as if they had been plunked down by some tour guide who had informed them that this was a "must do". They all spoke English, which was unfortunate because the content of the conversation was rather banal. "Where are you from?" "Is this your first class at the school?" "Where are you staying?" "Where did you hear about the course?" The advantage of being in a foreign country and not understanding a word is that you can imagine that the conversations center upon philosophical and intellectual matters.

The conversation droned on while we waited for the stragglers. Why is it that the tardy rule the world? Finally our numbers were complete. The very last person to arrive was a self-important woman who had traveled from New Jersey to Paris just to attend this class. (You'd have thought that she could have made it on time.) But I guess she



knew the ropes: she was a Cordon Bleu class junkie. This was her third class this year. Her routine? She came to the class, shopped for all of the exotic French ingredients and paraphernalia needed to replicate her class experience and immediately caught the first plane home to Jersey to *donner l'assaut*. The art, sculpture, music, architecture and entire ambiance of Paris held no allure. Her practice added a whole new dimension to the concept of take-home food.



Our numbers complete, we were divided into two teams: one chef, one translator, and ten students to a team. We set off at a hurried pace to the market and six blocks later, we had arrived. This open area market, held every Wednesday and Friday, was four blocks long; stalls were crowded next to one another, extending along the sidewalks on both sides of the street. The stalls were substantial; most had overhangs to protect the customers from the varieties of Parisian seasons. It was crowded: not with tourists, or on-lookers, but with serious shoppers. These Parisians were on a mission and deadly serious, jostling one another to get the freshest in-season goods for the cheapest prices. They were clearly not impressed with our group milling around, gawkers and dawdlers intent only upon getting the translator's attention to ask the chef some inane question. I stood back out of the way to observe, get the lay of the land, and to separate myself from the riff-raff.

There was serious organization in the midst of this seeming chaos. The stalls selling similar merchandise were clustered together. The fresh vegetable stands first caught my eye. There were polished, thick asparagus, fennel







bulbs moist and compact, bright red and yellow tomatoes, ten different kinds of potatoes, all well scrubbed and separately labeled, piles of bright green beans, onions of all varieties, leeks, shallots, every sort of lettuce, endive (both Belgian and curly) enormous artichokes, peppers so bright green and red that they looked as if they had been polished, and celeriac root, radishes, and root vegetables. These glorious vegetables looked as if they were placed one by one in its own

special spot. I had never seen such variety and freshness.



Rows of fishmongers plied their wares in the next block. There was every sort of shellfish: cockles, mussels, clams, shrimp and oysters. Whole fish, at least ten varieties, neatly arranged on ice. They looked as though they had been swimming that very morning. There was even an octopus; its legs neatly stretched out.



Across the street were the prepared meats, sausages, pates, and terrines. Then the offal (so appropriately named) raising their heads, tails and innards. A creamy white nose and two ears was tagged *tête de veau*. The sight of the *tête* didn't make me want to swallow it whole on the spot but I wasn't repulsed. I even took a picture.



Rows of refrigerator cases displayed the more traditional meats, steaks, chops and roasts. Poultry





was also encased in refrigerated cases. There were ducks, chicken, capon, and guinea fowl. Some of the chickens kept their heads, some their feet. Peter Meyer devoted a chapter of French Lessons: Adventures with Knife, Fork and Corkscrew to the coveted *Poulets de Bresse*, roasting hens from the Midi identified by their characteristic blue feet. The chapter, entitled Aristocrats with Blue Feet are considered patriotic; their red crowns, white feathers and blue feet make up the colors of the *tricolore*. There is always a huge demand for these birds in France; they are rarely exported.



The liveliest section served prepared foods where proprietors chatted with one another and responded to questions and banter from customers. Cooks labored over huge pans, shaped like enormous woks containing stews, couscous, paella and other entrees. There were cooked chicken, ribs, sausages, salads, and vegetables. An incredible section with tremendous quality.



Our chef bought each of us a crepe made to order by a man and his wife working at their establishment called *Crêperie Bretonne*. The crepes were individually made on a huge crepe pan and had the possibility of a variety of fillings: meat, vegetables, jams and fruits. Ours were chewy, fresh and tasty; sprinkled with sugar but the crepes were so substantial that they cried for a heavier, tastier filling to balance the flavors.



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to balance



Some of the indoor permanent shops along the street blended with the market offerings so a shopper could have a continuous supply of riches. These were boulangeries and pâtisseries displaying gateaux, tartes, gallettes and other confections. The cheese shop was another permanent fixture providing hundreds of different cheeses. The proprietor was appropriately garbed in a beret and blazer. He patiently stood with our chef for photographs; even I joined that Kodak moment. Our chef was a modest, rather ordinary man, dressed in a sports coat, shirt and trousers. He was most patient and seemed proud to be able to show off his country's proud traditions.



After walking up and down both sides of the street thoroughly exploring all of the foodstuffs, it was time to return to the school. Walking back I tried to put together what I had just seen in the context of my readings and other French practices observed over the past two summers.

Deep in thought I arrived at this truth. Paradoxically, the secret of French cooking may be that they most French hostesses don't. Cook, that is. The French purchase exquisitely prepared food from the professionals offering their wares at markets such as the one just visited. French women purchase entrees (prepared fish, fowl, meats and sauces) take them home to their tiny kitchens, warm the food then sauté or steam some wonderful vegetables, and, *Voilà! Le Diner*. French women don't make bread, what are boulangeries for anyway? They don't make puddings, pies, crisps, and buckles. What are patisseries for anyway? Why waste electricity roasting your own chicken when you can buy it already cooked? A cheese course served with fresh fruit is elegant and no one would ever expect a







“homemaker” to make her own cheese. French women are much smarter than their American counterparts. American women are instilled with the notion that “cooking from scratch” is the only respectable way. Where did the expression “cooking from scratch” come from, and, what is the point? I decided to keep this secret to myself while observing what the light lunch and cooking demonstration would reveal.

The light lunch confirmed my hypothesis. It began with avocados stuffed with a shrimp salad mixture. Delicious! However, the shrimp salad was available at the fishmongers, already prepared. The green salad consisted of fresh crisp lettuce, lightly dressed. The salad did not have bits and pieces of vegetables, nuts, cheeses, meats and fruits that clutter American salads. The baguettes (from the boulangerie) were served with a variety of cheeses (from our bereted proprietor) and along with pates and terrines from the boucherie. For dessert, fresh strawberries and cream. The food was served with a cold delicate Rosé wine, its complex flavors did not hint of stomping French feet. The chefs acknowledged that some of the cheeses had been purchased at the open market that day but said the rest of the lunch had been “prepared ahead of time.” But, by whom? I will wager the preparation was not done by our Cordon Bleu chefs.

Feeling entirely sated from our lunch, it was time for the cooking demonstration. The chef prepared asparagus in hollandaise sauce, garnished with salmon roe, mashed potatoes, fillet of fish and a dessert of poached pineapple with almond ice cream. The demonstration took about two and a half hours and I learned five se-









crets of French cooking. I emailed my friends that I would reveal all for the cost of the class: 125 euros. I had no takers. It is painful to give this away for nothing but I must to prove my point. These secrets are amazingly simple and easy; actually not worth the 125 euros.

1. Use plenty of butter but first clarify the butter: that is melt the butter to separate the clear fraction from the remainder. Without the dairy solids it is possible to cook at a much higher temperature because, without the solids, the butter does not burn. It is, therefore, possible to have the wonderful flavor of the butter with the flavor that only searing can bring.

2. When making mashed potatoes make sure all of the liquid is removed from the cooked potatoes. Put the potatoes in the oven to dry them out. Add equal amounts of olive oil and butter to the potatoes and then add hot milk.

3. Peel asparagus before cooking, put them in bundles, tie them with string and cook them upright in boiling water in a covered container to assure that they are evenly cooked throughout.

4. The chef filleted the fish, a John Dory, before our eyes. But why bother ? What are fishmongers for? This apparently was not an unique observation. Kathleen Flinn's memoir of her year at the Cordon Bleu The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry graphically describes a chef's demonstration of fish filleting. One student, an American woman, questioned:"But they have someone at the market that will do the filleting, so why do we have to do it?" The chef, highly annoyed and a bit defensive, growled, "Why are you at school? Why don't you have the butcher roast you



the meat too?” Without the complications of filleting our chef’s preparation was very simple: the filets were sautéed in olive oil, clarified butter warmed in another fry pan, capers and parsley added.

5. The dessert required a little brute force. Chop off the top of the pineapple. Cut out the eyes and then poach it. Poaching does not require time and attention. The chef made the almond milk ice cream. Don’t bother with that, find some in the freezer at the supermarket.

6. Clean up the kitchen as you work. This last one is so mundane. My husband, not a chef, tells me this constantly. Not selflessly, for the glory of the cuisine, but because it is his job to clean up afterwards.

So that’s it! Butter, olive oil, peel, buy filets, buy sorbet and clean.

After I finished the class I boarded the *Métro* and returned to our rendezvous near the *Gare* where I told my husband all about my day at Le Cordon Bleu. I explained my hypothesis on the secret of French cooking. He was not particularly impressed.

This did not discourage me. I am not a scientist; scientists objectively test their theories. I sought only to confirm my theory. I am able to offer the following proof.

1. Mireille Galiano seeks to inform American women of French ways in French Women for All Seasons. She devotes a chapter to entertaining with absolutely no mention of food preparation. Instead she suggests that the hostess be “put together, and “wear spiffy hostess slippers to show that your heart is in the right place,” concluding that “It’s



awkward to sit down with someone who looks like she has been slaving over a hot stove.” The premium is placed upon food that can be “made entirely or mostly beforehand and served with a minimum of fuss.” Food, prepared previously and by someone else would clearly fall into this category.

2. Marcia McEvoy, writing in the magazine Domino, explained her quandary. “I didn’t think much about the social dynamics of kitchens until 1974, when I started entertaining in my first Parisian apartment. Unlike in America, home of the open cooking/dining area, in the land of haute cuisine, food preparation is traditionally conducted in a separate space, one that’s reserved, like *la chambre* and *la toilette*, for private business.” You see American women cook in the open because they are doing the cooking; French women cook in a cramped private area because they are merely warming someone else’s cooking.

Confirmation of Ms. McEvoy’s insights were actually confirmed, I realized, by the Montparnasse apartment. It was admittedly a small studio apartment, one would not expect a McMansion kitchen within its walls. But i am familiar with studio apartments in other parts of the world, most familiarly Canada and the United States. The “civilized” kitchens were small but had full size refrigerators, stoves with full burners and ovens, adequate counter and cupboard space. The Montparnasse kitchen, pictured on the adjacent page, had none of these luxuries. It would be called a galley kitchen connottating ship’s narrow passage except that it was enclosed, a narrow enclosed hallway. The refrigerator was small and under the kitchen counter, there were four burners, not quite burners but “hotplates” a 1930’s American term for electrical elements usually used illegally in rooming houses. There was no oven, no dishwasher, a







microwave, on the counter, added a note of modernity. A hinged piece of wood could be supported to resemble either a drop down table or a chopping block. It was definitely sufficient for breakfasts and occasional snacks but the majority of those living in this apartment building lived there full time and presumably ate most of their meals “in”. Impossible, said in the French manner.

3. My third source is Julia herself, in My Life in Paris, “To my great surprise, I’d discovered that many Frenchwomen didn’t know how to cook any better than I did; quite a lot of them had no interest in the subject whatsoever, though most of them were expert in eating in restaurants. This housewife course was so elementary that after two days I knew it wasn’t what I’d had in mind at all.”

The truth became self-evident. Julia travelled to France, took professional chef’s lessons at Le Cordon Bleu, returned to the United States. She wrote a series of wildly popular cookbooks, performed on her own television series, became the guru of *haute cuisine* (to mix metaphors.) The poor American housewife struggles to replicate these recipes, under incredible pressure. While on the other side of the Atlantic the French woman continues doing what she has always done: shopping at markets, cheese shops, and patisseries, returning to her tiny kitchen to warm, arrange and display another chef’s work. I asked the French husband of a friend of mine to review this article to be certain that my French spelling, articles and grammar were proper. He commented at the conclusion of this paragraph: “Yes, no French person in their right mind makes their own patisseries, my mother never made a *mille-feuille* in her life.”







4. Eric, my friend's husband, grew up in one of the suburbs of Paris, immigrating to the United States when he was in his twenties. Eric was the youngest of a very traditional French couple, a virtual expert on French mores. His unsolicited comments provide further proof of my hypothesis. "Julia Child cooks like a chef in a French restaurant. Most french women don't cook restaurant-style menus; it's too complicated. French women (and men sometimes!) cook family style French cuisine; shepherd's pies, ratatouille, fish soup, etc. Anything you can throw in an oven or a speed cooker and cook unattended! Maybe its time to write a cookbook on family-style french cooking? Great story, I loved it and laughed too! "

It sounds almost sacrilegious to say but I fear that Julia Child, the beloved icon, has subjected American women to a life of servitude. The effort, energy, and sheer persistence required to follow in Julia's footsteps is graphically described in Julie Powell's recent book Julie and Julia: My Year of Cooking Dangerously. Julie, at the age of almost thirty, finds herself in a funk and, desperate to find purpose and meaning in life, voluntarily determines to cook all 524 recipes in Julia Child's 1961 classic Mastering the Art of French Cooking in the span of one year. At the encouragement of her husband she blogs this incredibly arduous task, attracting hundreds of readers. To summarize, she barely serves dinner before midnight, drinks many a vodka gimlet, injures herself performing arcane tasks such as extracting beef marrow from the bone and severely tests her marriage. But nowhere in the book does Julie recognize that this book, found on her mother's kitchen shelf, was actually the bible for the middle-class housewife of the sixties and seventies and that a generation of women were required by the mores of the time to cook, at least occasionally, at this ex-



pert, professional level. Although, I suppose, the laugh is on me because Julie not only got a best seller out of this trial by fire but also now IS a writer.

But this is why I love traveling. How else could I have discovered that I have wasted most of my adult life slaving in a kitchen, trying to live up to an ideal that, in its purist form, never existed? Take-out here I come!





*Bon Appétit!!*







