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Remembering Julia Child: "Come Sit Next to Me"

At a foodie event in rural West Virginia, the legendary chef treated me like a favorite nephew — the same way she treated everyone

posted by John Stark, August 6, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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Julia Child, Miami Book Fair International, 1989
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While at a food conference in the rural hills of West Virginia, I got to experience two amazing forces of the universe. One was a comet called Hyakutake that swings past Earth every 17,000 years. The other was an equally dynamic phenomenon named Julia Child.

The legendary chef, who would've celebrated her 100th birthday on August 15, was standing alongside me on a balcony of the Greenbrier Resort's top-floor hospitality suite.

We watched together as Hyakutake made its very close pass at Earth. Julia was just as luminous, and certainly warmer.

I can only think how lucky I am that she once entered my world.

At the time I was an editor on a national food magazine based in the Deep South. It was my first time attending the weeklong Professional Food Writers Symposium at the Greenbrier. The annual event took place at the historic resort in White Sulphur Springs from 1993 to 2011.

Anne Willan, chef, cookbook author and founder of the Ecole de Cuisine LaVarenne in Burgundy, France, was running the symposium. When I read that her close friend and business partner, Julia Child, was going to be the special guest, I immediately signed up. I was dying to meet the legendary Julia, whom I'd grown up watching on PBS, and who was now 84. It was because of Julia that I became a foodie.

Scores of people were attending the conference, so I figured my chances of getting any face time with Julia were pretty slim. Considering how frail she had become in recent years, I suspected she'd be keeping a low profile, glimpsed every so often like the moon on a cloudy night.

(**more:** [Judy Garland: Where Her Rainbow Began](#))

On Monday morning I attended the symposium's first writing class, held in a basement conference room at the Greenbrier. Everyone was sitting on folding chairs at cafeteria-style tables that had been lined up in long rows. As writing coach Don Fry was lecturing from the podium, I happened to turn around in my seat. Sitting at the table behind me, squeezed in between two other people, was Julia Child, her teased copper hair and blue eyes instantly recognizable. She had a notebook in front of her and kept scribbling in it.

As surprised as I was to see Julia Child taking a food writing class, I was more astonished that during the break no one made a beeline toward her. Usually when celebrities are seen at public

events, the attendees jockey for position. Who can get closest? I seemed to be the only one in the room who was star struck.

But I guess these food writers were used to her. In her later years, Julia went nonstop from one food-and-wine event to the next, be it in the U.S. or abroad. Unlike Hyakutake, she wasn't about to keep out of sight for an extended period. Not because she wanted to be seen — she wanted to participate. I think one reason no one seemed to be in awe of her was that she was just so unassuming, exactly as she came across on TV — the antithesis of today's ego-driven celebrity chefs. She was even wearing a nametag like the rest of us. Can you picture Gordon Ramsay sporting a nametag?

No Child Left Behind

During my first few days at the conference I saw Julia at every class, lunch and dinner. Although I hadn't gotten up the nerve to approach her yet, it wasn't like I couldn't. The only rule for attendees was we couldn't take her photograph.

On Tuesday night, unable to sleep, I headed to the hospitality suite.

When I walked in, I saw Julia sitting on a settee in front of a lit fireplace. She was talking to two food writers and a baker from San Francisco. When she noticed this complete stranger, she patted the cushion firmly but gently, as if it were a ball of dough to be rolled out. "Come sit next to me," she said, as if she had just spotted her favorite nephew. "There's room for two." So of course I joined her.

Even though I could never have imagined sharing a settee with the grand dame of cooking, I was totally at ease. Julia made you feel that way. As soon as I sat down, she asked me what I did. Knowing how she felt about the "light" food revolution in America, I told her she wasn't going to like my answer. "My magazine does healthy, low-fat recipes," I told her. "Well, we don't really need all that cream and butter," she said. "My views have been changing."

As the night and alcohol wore on, we began telling funny stories about our line of work. All except Julia, who dropped out of the conversation early on. She didn't go back to her room, though. She seemed content just to listen, a small smile on her face.

When Flo Braker, the famous baker, asked why I took a job on a magazine in Alabama, I said I had been recruited from New York to give the publication a sophisticated, national voice. I told my new friends about a caption that had appeared in the magazine before I came onboard. It was about preserving fruits and vegetables, and it read, "How to Put Pickles Up Yourself."

My story had the group laughing loudly, except for Julia, whose eyelids had drifted shut, and who seemed to be in dreamland.

The next day Julia led a cooking demonstration in a small theater in the hotel. She was showing us how to make a fig-stuffed chicken. As she was cutting up the whole bird with a cleaver, she remarked, "You're either a leg man or a breast man!" — a corny old joke. As everyone was doing their best to fake a polite laugh, Julia looked out into the audience and right at me:

"Rather like putting pickles up yourself, right John?" she said. Everyone screamed with laughter, even though only four of us in the audience understood the reference. But it didn't matter. Just hearing Julia say "pickles" with her identifiable tremolo was priceless. Frail as she was, she didn't miss a thing.

Why the Unshakable Julia Started to Panic

On the last morning of the symposium, I headed to the basement to attend a recipe editing class that began at eight.

When I got to the conference room door, I saw Julia standing there, hesitating about going in. Was she finally coming to her senses, I wondered — maybe the woman who had spent decades testing and translating French recipes into English didn't need a class on the subject?

I always remembered her on TV seeming unshakable. If she made a mistake in cooking something, she just carried on. Never apologize for what you serve, she would tell her viewers.

But now she seemed confused, unable to move.

Then again, it had been a long week. And every night that I went to the hospitality suite, she was there until after midnight. Did she ever sleep?

"Are you okay?" I asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Oh, John," she said, "I can't go to class."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because," she said, "I've *forgotten* my nametag."

I leaned toward her, as if she were a favorite aunt who was suffering a temporary memory loss, and said in a low, reassuring voice that only she could hear: "You don't need a nametag. You're Julia Child."

"*But I do!*" she countered, her voice rising like bubbles in mineral water.

With that, she took my arm and led me toward the elevator. "You must help me back to my room," she said. Even though she was bent forward from osteoarthritis, and wearing white, low-heeled espadrilles, she still towered over me. "Now hurry," she said. "We can't be late."

Five minutes later we were standing arm-in-arm on the third floor, in front of her door. "I'll be just a moment," she said, letting herself in. As the door clicked shut behind her, I stood in the corridor thinking just how absurd this situation was. Or was it?

When she reappeared, a cellophane-encased nametag that said "Julia Child" was pinned to her earth-toned silk blouse. The missing ingredient — the one that brought all the flavors together to create a beloved classic — had been found and properly added.

"We can go now," she said, taking my arm. Her blue eyes were brighter, her voice more upbeat and chipper.

"I am *ready* for class!"

I felt as if I were hitched to a comet.