



## Julia's Secret Ingredient

*Reflections from one of Julia Child's assistant cooks*

It wasn't that Julia gave me any secret recipes or special cooking tips.

One very hot July weekend in 1990, I came to discover the most secret of her ingredients. The venue, a glorious food and wine media event, named "A Celebration of American Regional Cuisine, *from the earth to the table*" at Fetzer Vineyards Culinary Center and Kitchen Gardens in Mendocino County. Its purpose was to showcase American Chefs and American Cuisine.

What brought us together was Ratatouille. I had a love affair with vegetables and ratatouille was a favorite. Not knowing that this was Julia's dish, I choose to

prepare it as an assistant to one of 15 renowned American Chefs. The event took place over 3 days with a formal Friday evening sit down dinner, Saturday cooking classes and tours of the kitchen gardens and winery and on Sunday an all day tasting event for 500 guests. With Julia as my guide and I as her assistant, my job was to prepare enough Ratatouille from the peak of the season ingredients; eggplant, tomatoes, onions, peppers, squash and garlic, olive oil and herbs. The Ratatouille would be served for the dinner, cooking demonstrations and Sunday's event.

When I was not cutting vegetables, my time was spent at Julia's side as her escort and assistant. Cooking was my profession and I was never professionally trained. For the many years that I cooked, it was thought of as a menial job. The emergence of California Cuisine and America's love affair with Chefs changed all of that. As a pioneer among others, in the 1980's, I participated in the transformation of the food consciousness of America. It was Julia Child who had changed the world's idea of women in the kitchen, FOREVER!

Now back to Julia's secret. The most important ingredient in any dish is love. Love what it is that you do. It was love that Julia guided from the heart of the earth into her food. She radiated a quality of care that filled the hearts of everyone. Her attention to every detail was how she approached her work. Julia's knowledge of each ingredient and the time of year of the ingredient's perfection was taught to her through the interaction with the food and the food producers. Many of these gardener/farmers had been growing their specialty crop their entire lives and selling it in the marketplace to their neighbors. It was not until many years later when I read Julia's book, *My Life in France*, that I realized why we became fast friends. For the 8 years before we met, my work had been to connect local farmers and their crops to the "Food and Wine Culinary Stars" of Sonoma County, the Bay Area and beyond. Together, the farmers/gardeners and I and as well as others made available to Chef's, the ingredients and experience of the French countryside.

The field of the garden and the kitchen is the realm of direct experience. The garden is the place of life where the energy of the Sun is converted by the fruits, vegetables and herbs making this energy available to us. Julia was just like the Sun, shining her light and her warmth to all who were graced by her presence. Her kitchen was the realm of the Alchemist. Her viewers, warmed not by the heat of the oven or the energy of butter's calories, they were warmed by her genuine down to earth nature.

So, in the kitchen become the Alchemist. With your hands, be the transformer of sunlight into sustenance. Cook and you will be changed forever by the experience. Julia Child, the garden and the kitchen have taught me this.

By Carol Klesow, August 2009