

## My Culinary Development

Perhaps the key event, or series of events, was my third year at YLS. A foundation for this, however, was laid as a youngster, not yet age 8.

### 1. The artichoke incident, Ashland Avenue, Chicago.

My best buddy, down the street, was of Italian heritage -- I see now, looking back now, but of course at the time I knew nothing of heritage. We went over to his apartment and entered through the back, from the alley, climbing to the second floor. (We all lived in small apartment buildings, small yard in back -- there was a small garage in back there usually also). The kitchen was in back, as in our place. His mother was there, standing over a pot of boiling water. I did not realize it at the time, but after watching much TV, and reflecting on this scene, she looked exactly like an actress cast in the role of "typical Italian housewife." Holding and fiddling with, sometimes twisting, a towel.

She said she was cooking artichokes, of which I had never heard.

"Would you like to try this?"

"Yes," said I.

She fished out one and tore off a leaf, and I presume dipped it in olive oil or butter and handed it to me, explaining how to scrape off the thick part with my front teeth. She hovered over me with a certain anxiety about whether this kid of northern European extraction might not like this southern European delight.

"Delicious," said I.

She was so pleased.

### 2. My mother prepared me by giving me recipes.

After my second year, I decided to live off campus at Stanford in an apartment unit shared with a classmate -- a unit which had a small kitchen. My mother's recipes were handwritten on the small paper she also used for her letters. I remember in particular a recipe for pork chops, lightly floured and fried, and easy to make. But undoubtedly the key recipe was for the spaghetti with meat sauce which was our family favorite -- a recipe given to my father by Luigi Mendocino, a fellow photog at the Trib.

But during these years I also went further afield, coming to know that place on El Camino Real run by Russian immigrants (a huge roast beef spinning vertically for slicing). I learned what blinis are: there in a gigantic copper chafing dish. And the delicatessen in the Embarcadero shopping center. (I can remember nothing, literally

nothing, of the food served when I lived on campus -- other than that on Sundays only two meals were served, brunch and dinner).

Another great Stanford culinary experience was sourdough bread. Unknown outside California at the time, but always available at SFO for travelers flying through that airport on their way to places not fortunate enough to have acquired a taste yet for the best in baguettes. Paris was the brand name. I was always proud to bring some home, and my parents and brother loved it.

3. Food at the Princeton Grad College was very good.

Lots of London broil, prepared under the supervision of a grad of the famous Cornell Hotel Management School. Meals were served in the ornate dining hall modelled on an Oxford college dining hall. (We had to wear graduation robes to these meals, tho it mattered not what we wore underneath those robes). The tables were arranged perpendicular to a central axis, down which came a server pushing a cart with trays of food that were passed out to each table. We scooped out meat or vegetables from the tray and handed it on to the next person. I think there were about ten of us to a table. When the tray got down to the fifth person, he handed it across the table, and so the tray then made its way back to the server.

4. Food at YLS was good also, if not memorable, but YLS was key.

The key was that in my last year I lived off campus, and my friend and roommate Flip Kissam was interested in the two of us working our way through the recipes in James Beard's cookbook. (Also, we had a good Jewish deli near where we lived on Elm Street.)

Flip and I grew particularly fond of Beard's Braised Brisket Bordeaux, of which Beard says, "This is a French peasant dish from the Bordeaux region in France, and I first ate it there with the local pickers at grape harvest time. The cook prepared five meals a day for fifty hungry field hands. This was one of her specialties". My Chinese daughter has loved it since she was toddler.

(Our third roommate was the famous Lenny Ross, who had graduated but was staying on for a degree in econ: "At ten, he won \$100,000 on The Big Surprise . . . many questions concerned the stock market . . . . At eleven, he won \$64,000 on The \$64,000 Challenge." We rarely saw him, as he stayed in his room, on the phone with his stockbroker.)

Incidentally, Flip at one point went out to hear a talk by Joe Lieberman, who was just beginning the political career that would eventually elevate him to being a (losing) candidate for Vice President and (winning) US Senator from Connecticut. When Flip came back, I asked him what he thought of Lieberman. "Just another politician," was Flip's answer.

5. After YLS, in England, I worked my way through Julia Child's famous *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, (in affordable paperback in England, thanks to Penguin). A highlight was *Veau Sylvie*.

The Palm was a deli in Oxford's central covered market, run by a wonderful Jewish woman who was a wartime refugee from Czechoslovakia: salt-cured sour pickles and real brie, not the pasteurized American version. Fishmongers sold Dover Sole, which I grew to love.

Two other developments in the home country: a) Afternoon tea -- always offered, and when I accepted, I was asked what I wanted in it. "Lemon" always produced: "I think we have a lemon in the refrigerator" -- a search which always turned up empty. I soon became used to milk in tea, and grew to like it. b) Port and sherry. With the dons. Sherry before dinner and port after dinner. Found both pleasant, particularly the port, but true wine came later in my development. I was glad to learn, however, where these two specialties came from.

6. The biggest part of my culinary development, far too big to recount in detail, was cooking when I came back to the states and lived in Washington, DC. And the many years that followed.

This was greatly aided by the fact that a couple of blocks away from where we lived in Georgetown was the French Market, over on Wisconsin Ave, started by three Frenchmen who in fact were from Algeria. Their biggest customer was the French Embassy, which was not far away, and which in those days made a great effort to keep everything very French at the French embassy, including lunch for staff and fancy dinner receptions.

The meats were not only of the sort favored by the French, but cut in the style with which they were accustomed. Julia Child was a frequent customer, delighted to be able to find such an institution in the part of DC where she lived. This was before she became a TV star, but after she'd graduated from the Cordon Bleu.

A tall Californian who played basketball at Smith, deemed too tall for the military, she ended up working for the OSS, first in DC (where, though her specialty was index cards, she also developed a shark repellent, still in use, to protect downed airmen), then in Ceylon and China (Kunming, Yunnan province, where the Green Lake of my book by that name is located). Married co-worker, Paul Child, "known for his sophisticated palate," in 1946. His postwar career was with the Foreign Service, first in DC, where they bought a century-old townhouse on Olive St., in Georgetown, before he was sent to Paris as an exhibits officer with the US Information Agency. Rented the house out for eight years, moved back in 1956, renovating, the kitchen, of course. They lived there until 1961 and it was during this period that she and her coauthors wrote the book I utilized so often seven years later in England, in my

culinary development. Julia was thus not the average customer at the French Market, but one who wanted to try this and try that, testing the skills, no doubt, of even these experienced hands.

## 7. The grill.

We decided to vacation in the Pyrenees. Fly to Barcelona, drive over the Pyrenees, proceed to Carcassonne, then drive back. Franco was still alive, sort of -- in coma, from which he'd never awaken. Spain was also in a coma, having refrained from and in part excluded from the postwar development of Europe. The food, in particular, was terrible, paella being the only dish of interest on offer, and how often can one eat paella?

We were on our way back from Carcassonne, historic town, when they finally pulled the plug. Two days later the Cortes Españolas proclaimed Juan Carlos King of Spain, and a Mass celebrating the new king's investiture followed. During this period, we had flown to Ibiza in search of one of my wife's close friends from high school who had decided to pursue an alternative lifestyle. We found her, and, amazingly, we found that within walking distance of where she was living in the countryside there was a restaurant that served meats and seafood and vegetables grilled on their outdoor, wood-fired grill. Absolutely delicious! Served with Rioja. I ate, indeed overate, like a famished person (so much so that in the middle of the night, I lost some of it, but that mattered not).

The second grill in my culinary development was far more mundane, but far more enduring. Sitting out in the backyard of our house in Georgetown, reading the Sunday papers, a few years later, my eye fell on ads for gas-fired grills. I thought I would buy one and give it a try. Never looked back.

The third was occasioned by tearing down the original, tiny kitchen and building a new one. Island with black marble top in the center, containing the gas cooktop. Et al. Here's the clicker, however: DC winters are not as cold as those in Chicago, but they do make outdoor grilling inconvenient. Why not an indoor gas grill in its own fireplace at the far end of the new kitchen? Culinary development via grilling thus continued.

Soft-shelled Crabs, Black Cod, Wahoo, Grouper, Bulgogi, Galbi, even Salmon, to say nothing of cauliflower, asparagus, eggplant, tomatoes, leeks, onions, garlic, and to say nothing of grapefruit, nectarines, apricots, blueberries, pears, peaches, papaya, mango, melon. Just to name a few.