



American Treasure

A VISIT WITH JUDITH JONES,
THE CULINARY AND PUBLISHING ICON

*story by Sara B. Franklin
photos by Natalie Conn*

In January 2013, I began meeting with Judith Jones in her Manhattan home to gather an oral history of her life in food on behalf of the Julia Child Foundation for Gastronomy and the Culinary Arts. As the spring progressed, so too did our rapport, becoming more intimate and less rigidly “on task” with each passing session. Our conversations ping-ponged from the majesty of M.F.K. Fisher’s prose to the pomposity of today’s “foodie” world to the wonders of keeping a garden to our longings toward motherhood and “leaning in.” To say I developed a bit of a crush on Jones is an understatement; I was enchanted with her vigor (she turned 90 earlier this year), her belly laugh, her ease with a chef’s knife, and her stories of the culinary personalities that make up the who’s who of food writing.

While my time with Jones left a deep impact on me, her remarkable life has resonance beyond the personal. She created an existence for herself filled with love, pleasure, and sensuality; and forged a career that helped change the way Americans eat and think about food.

In the late 1940s, a young woman named Judith Bailey embarked upon what was meant to be a three-week vacation in Italy and France. Nearly a year later, she posted a letter to her parents, who were baffled as to why their daughter, raised with all the opportunities of a privileged New Yorker, had stayed away and, worse still, remained unmarried for so long. Young Judith had been happily scraping by in Paris, working alternately as a secretary, literary scout, and an assistant cook (for what today would be called an underground supper club). “I know you didn’t send me to an expensive college to have me become a cook,” she wrote. “But you must understand that in France cooking is not regarded as demeaning. It is an art.” The note was prescient. More than 60 years later, the author of that letter is considered one of the most influential figures in the history of culinary publishing.

She feels most celebrity chefs today are dilettantes. She wishes the food media wouldn’t stroke their egos so.

Today, Jones lives on Manhattan’s Upper East Side in the same building where she grew up. Since her husband Evan died of cancer in 1996, she’s been kept company by Mabon, the latest in a long line of dogs she has doted upon throughout her life. At home, she spends most of her time reading or cooking, words and food being the passions that have defined and dominated her professional and personal lives. Until just two years ago, she was a senior editor and vice president at the Knopf publishing house, where she worked with such luminaries as John Updike and Anne Tyler. While her literary career has been long and impressive, it’s her impact on the culinary world for which she is recognized and admired. She is responsible for nurturing and, in many cases, discovering the people who shaped American attitudes toward food and cooking.

Jones’ kitchen provides an apt metaphor for the woman who cooks in it. It is compact, efficient, unfussy, and begging to be useful. Scarred wooden cutting boards are stacked against the wall and a motley collection of knives clings to magnetic strips. The range is a hulking black thing, disproportionate to the small space, and row upon row of open shelving holds glass

jars of grains, beans, and spices. A folding stepladder stays tucked beside the refrigerator for when Jones, 5 feet tall in her loafers, needs to retrieve certain pieces of bulky cookware or platters for hosting, which she does frequently.

She still cooks all her own meals and does her own shopping, most of which takes place 10 blocks away at the closest market worthy of her business. On a warm spring morning, Jones was in her kitchen making sauce gribiche, a condiment of mustard, hard-boiled eggs, herbs, pickles, and capers that she has favored since discovering it in Paris nearly seven decades ago. She was planning to serve the gribiche over left-over roast lamb, sliced baguette (toasted to offset its slight staleness), and fresh tomatoes. Jones believes one of the biggest problems with American home cooks is a disregard for leftovers. She always has been both practical and frugal.

Jones stood at her counter, chopping egg whites and cornichons. She looked elegant in her cream-colored blouse and sharply creased black slacks. Pearls studded her earlobes and a slim headband held her white chin-length hair off her deeply lined face. A pair of half-moon reading glasses hung around her neck. Over the ensemble she had cinched a colorfully striped apron. Wagner was playing from speakers in the living room, and Jones hummed along as she worked. She likes to point out that all the bending and stretching she does in the kitchen is awfully good exercise. Cooking has kept her energetic and in good physical form, she says. Indeed, her movements are certain and steady, making it difficult to believe she is as old as she is.

She has always loved to eat. Jones recalls the pervasive attitude toward food during her youth as austere; eating was a necessity, but taking pleasure from and talking about food were seen as taboo, like sex. Jones admired those who indulged in the more sensuous aspects of food, like the family’s Barbadian

cook, Edie, who told stories of hot peppers and love affairs, and Jones’s father, Monty, who occasionally snuck her off for lunch at a French restaurant and ordered whatever came in the largest portion. At Vermont’s Bennington College, then women only, she awakened to the pleasures of both mind and body—intellectual debate, gardening, poetry, and older men.

Jones returned to New York after graduation, filled with disdain for the life expected of her: marriage to a nice man, preferably a wealthy Wall Street type; private club membership; and a place in the Social Register. She began working in publishing where she befriended authors such as Gore Vidal, but she found her colleagues dull. It was a gentlemen’s industry, and the men—all married—only wanted a jump in bed. So, like many privileged Americans in the years immediately following World War II, she took off for Europe.

Accompanied by a college friend and chaperoned by her cousin Jane, Jones spent three weeks exploring Italy and Paris. She swooned over the latter. “I was just in love with the French,



JONES AT HOME IN VERMONT.



particularly the French women. I loved how they could tie a scarf so beautifully, and I loved that they loved their men.”

Days before Jones was returning home, her purse—containing her return tickets and passport—was stolen from a bench while she sat daydreaming. Relieved of the burden of going home, Jones embarked upon a prolonged adventure in Paris. Having unsuccessfully worked her way through all the contacts given her back home, she begged for a job as a girl Friday with Evan Jones, a divorced Minnesota-born journalist working as an editor at *Weekend* magazine. Jones claims she was a terrible typist, but the two bonded over a lunch of boudin blanc just a few days into her post, and were together from then on.

Judith and Evan developed a romantic life and domestic routine around food, taking great pleasure in the superb baked goods, wines, cheese, meats, fish, and produce available in Paris, even to those on a tight budget. They loved to cook and eat together, and often hosted expat friends in their cramped rental apartments.

Lavishing attention on cooking and eating allowed Jones to push back against the conventional womanhood she had grown up with, that of the delicate hands-off housewife. Her mother's only involvement in food preparation was the dictation of grocery lists for meals she wanted prepared. The industrial boom of the post-war years further distanced people from their food; everything was going into packages, an attempt to save the poor little woman from getting her hands dirty and smelly. Minimizing contact with ingredients and time spent in the kitchen were seen as signs of progress.

But Jones liked being in the midst. Why let someone else make things happen when she could do it herself? Her emerging gutsiness in the kitchen seeped into her work in publishing. While a secretary in Doubleday's newly opened Paris office, Jones was instructed to review and file manuscripts that had been passed over before they were discarded for good. She was captivated by a photograph of a young girl with wavy brunette hair and began to read the attached pages. It was the book that would become *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. She boldly persuaded the editors at Doubleday to send it to their counterparts in New York. The book, published in the U.S. in 1952, remains an international bestseller to this day.

After eloping in Venice, Judith and Evan returned to New York to be closer to his children, who lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with their mother. After a few dead-end jobs, Jones was hired at Knopf in 1957. Apparently Blanche Knopf, vice president of the company she founded with her husband, had hoped to publish *Anne Frank*, but the staff had persuaded her the book wouldn't sell. Doubleday's subsequent success with

the title had embittered her. Upon hearing that the young Mrs. Jones was responsible for *Anne Frank's* publication, she decided to give her a chance and hired her as a junior editor.

Two years into Jones' tenure, an enormous manuscript arrived on her desk. It had been written by three unknown women—Simone Beck, Louisette Berthole, and Julia Child. Jones was immediately captivated. She brought the new manuscript home chapter by chapter, testing the recipes to great success. Each one walked the cook through every step of preparation with careful instruction, and gave detailed information about ingredients and technique. The dishes turned out perfectly. The book was just what Jones had been looking for, a sort of reference guide that translated French cuisine for the American home cook. She imagined there must be others like her, hungry for the sophisticated food they had eaten on trips to Europe, but lacking the know-how to reproduce it in the States.

Jones went to bat for the book. Too junior to attend editorial meetings herself, she convinced Angus Cameron—a colleague and fellow bon vivant with whom she had become friendly—to speak on her behalf. It worked, and *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* was published in 1961 to instant acclaim. Americans flocked first to the bookstores, and then to their kitchens. Two years later, in 1963, Child went on public television as *The French Chef* and quickly became a household name. The cultural impact was phenomenal; Jones recalls that friends of hers who had never cooked were suddenly hosting entire dinner parties. Familiarity with Child's recipes, heavy copper cookware, and a practiced flick of the whisk became signs of distinction among the cultured elite. If you couldn't spend a lifetime basking in the culture of Paris, at least you could turn out a perfect boeuf bourguignon.

That year also saw the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, which proposed an idea of progress that directly opposed Child's "get in the kitchen and cook" message. Betty Friedan conceived of cooking as part of "the problem that has no name," the plight of bored and stifled housewives who possessed neither purpose nor independence. Cooking and household drudgery, Friedan and her disciples argued, kept women chained to the home, effectively barring them from the workforce and preventing their economic autonomy. But neither Jones nor Child was bound to her home or man. Instead, they had found a way to spin the private "invisible" work of cooking into the public realm, each carving a niche and career. They blurred the lines between work and home, modernity and tradition, domestic and feminist ideals.

Jones has worked hard her entire life to avoid being pigeonholed, so it should come as no surprise that she resists



JULIA CHILD AND JAMES BEARD.



being called an activist or a pioneer. She's not much for feminist ideas, and sometimes thinks the movement emphasizes the wrong goals. Women shouldn't be ashamed to use their femininity to get things they want, whether a partner or a promotion, she says. Jones fears that feminism has encouraged women to embody what she considers abhorrent masculine qualities, among them brashness and aggression. In her view, men have made a mess of politics and the state of the world, so she'd like to see more women run for office. And while she loves men, she has always been drawn to males who are somewhat androgynous—sensitive, insightful, and nurturing. Judith out-earned her husband—a freelance writer who penned a handful of books, some of them together with Judith—for much of their half-decade of marriage. Evan wrote mostly from home, while Judith went to the office daily and traveled extensively to do research or tour with her authors. When they bought a small home in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom in 1980, Judith commuted back and forth during the summers, arriving in Vermont at dawn on Saturday mornings and returning to Manhattan each Monday. She left her car at the train station; Evan never drove.

Jones succeeded in breaking boundaries and defying norms, but still struggled at work. For many years, she and Blanche were the only women in the Knopf offices. While editing prestigious writers helped Jones climb the ranks, her culinary pursuits were often perceived as fluff. Women were kept down, she remembers, and people often assumed she was a secretary rather than an editor.

She worked hard to legitimize matters gastronomic, and as a result, remains much in demand in the food world. But Jones abhors its self-important myopia. She feels that most food writing today focuses too much on hype and trends, and has always found restaurant chefs uninteresting. While she admired the late masters of haute cuisine who worked their way through grueling apprenticeships before earning their titles, she feels most celebrity chefs today are dilettantes. If only the food media wouldn't stroke their egos so.

Jones' apartment is a living monument to contemporary food history, and her kitchen has been graced and seasoned by virtually everyone who matters in American food. There's the pegboard behind the sink, inspired by Julia Child. It's hung with dark blue Le Creuset cookware that was once scrubbed to a perfect gleam by Lidia Bastianich's mother while Bastianich and Jones tested recipes. The refrigerator is plastered in aging snapshots. One is of Marion Cunningham with Scott Peacock, protégé to one of Jones' authors, the revered Virginia-born chef Edna Lewis. Another shows Julia Child and James Beard dressed in Western costumes.

It's tempting to see Jones' life as charmed. Indeed, she has benefitted from a great deal of luck, and a thread of good fortune seems to connect the pivotal moments of her life. The purse stolen from the park bench. The boss who became a husband, one who shared both her passions and distaste for convention. *The Diary of Anne Frank* in the slush pile. Julia Child. But to accept her version of the tale—that is, to write off her accomplishments as mere fate—is to mute the effects of nine decades' worth of conviction, savvy, tireless work, and a firm belief in following one's own instincts. "Don't waste your time on anything you don't really want," she says. "Sometimes you just find a different way."

