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Culinary Grandes Dames

Paola Westbeek celebrates the women who have influenced her journey in gastronomy—from Elizabeth David and Julia Child to Nigella Lawson

Paola Westbeek is a food, wine and travel journalist who has tasted her way through Europe, interviewing chefs, visiting vineyards and reviewing restaurants. Her work has appeared in *FRANCE Magazine* and other publications



IT'S BEEN 20 YEARS since a cookbook changed my life. Before devouring every page (and nearly every recipe) in Nigella Lawson's *Feast* (2004), I didn't give much thought to what I ate. Or perhaps I did, but not in a way that excited me. Food was sustenance and cooking a chore I wasn't particularly good at. Moreover, fear of excess calories and not being able to fit into my jeans left little room for indulging in things like "old-fashioned chocolate cake", "penne alla vodka" and "love buns". Nigella transformed my relationship with food, changing it from a source of panic to one of infinite pleasure.

Leafing through the food-splattered pages of *Feast*, I began to think of the women who shaped my culinary upbringing. These "grandes dames" of gastronomy not only influenced me profoundly with their words, recipes and unwavering passion for the art of eating, but they also left their mark on the culinary world in significant ways.

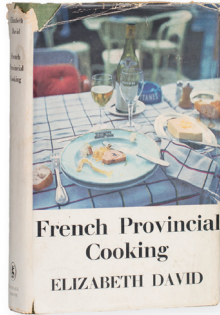
Take Eugénie Brazier, for example, who grew up with barely enough to eat yet with plenty of determination to achieve great things. After years of hard work on farms and later as a humble cook, she used the little savings she had to buy an old grocery store in Lyon and open La Mère Brazier, a restaurant that would attract the likes of Charles de Gaulle and Marlene Dietrich. A second location followed, and in 1933, she became the first chef ever to hold six Michelin

stars simultaneously, she writes: “Forgotten were the Sorbonne professors and the yards of Racine learned by heart (...). What had stuck was the taste for a kind of food quite ideally unlike anything I had known before.” She travelled extensively, spending time in Italy, Greece, Egypt and India—countries where she learned to cook the most exotic dishes with beautifully vibrant ingredients like lemon, apricots, tomatoes, almonds and olive oil. Dismayed by the drab food she

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stars simultaneously, three for each restaurant. Hailed as the mother of modern French cooking, Brazier’s simple yet elegant food was often lauded in the work of culinary author Elizabeth David, a “grande dame” in her own right who, with her pen, changed the way Britain ate.

Born into an upper-class family in Sussex in 1913, David developed a passion for French cuisine at the age of 16 while studying history and literature in Paris. Upon her return to England, it wasn’t her studies that had left a lasting impression, but the food she had discovered. In *French Provincial Cooking* (1960),



encountered upon her return to post-war Britain in 1946, she found solace in writing about her sunny culinary experiences, which, in turn, filled the hearts of the British with light and hope. When rationing ended in 1954 and foreign products slowly became available, David’s recipes made Mediterranean cuisine accessible, bringing much-needed colour and culinary joy to tables across the UK.

What David did for the UK, the exuberant and infinitely passionate Julia Child—who needs little introduction—did for America. Child demystified French cuisine with her iconic cookbook, *Mastering the*

Art of French Cooking (1961), and became the country's first celebrity chef. At a time when TV dinners and tinned foods were at the height of their popularity, she inspired home cooks to try elegant recipes, teaching them about techniques and the use of quality ingredients in an approachable and endearing way. I remember rushing home from school as a young girl to turn on PBS and watch *The French Chef*, not because I wanted to (or could) try her recipes back then, but because I was captivated by her personality. Little did I know how she would be the first to rouse my interest in French cuisine years later.

While Julia Child tempted us with her recipes, it was the prolific American author MFK Fisher who

enlightened us with her exquisite and sensual culinary prose about “the art of food and the taste of living”. In her brilliant essays, she extolled the pleasures of the table, addressed societal issues and explored connections between food and culture. One of my favourite books is *Love in a Dish*, a charming collection of culinary experiences that transport you to French villages and even describe how the love of food can potentially save a marriage!

In honour of International Women's Day this March 8, let us celebrate the legacy of these exceptional culinary legends. May their contributions to gastronomy remain deliciously relevant and continue to inspire us to savour life—one bite at a time. ■



Spring Has Sprung

The first day of spring occurs on March 20, although by the meteorological calendar it starts on March 1 and ends on May 31

The vernal (or spring) equinox on March 20 sees 12 hours of daylight and 12 hours of darkness globally. In the southern hemisphere it is the start of autumn

Our sense of smell can be more acute in the spring because there is often more moisture in the air

Although spring is often associated with the start of the pollen season, it actually isn't because some pollen types release as early as January

SOURCE: METOFFICE.GOV.UK