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TRIBUTES TO JULIA CHILD: Maria Speck

Julia as Food Pro

Missed an opportunity but found a passion

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The first and only time in my life I was anywhere near Julia Child, I had no idea who she was. I worked as a freelance journalist for German magazines, reporting on technology and society, and was attending one of my first IACP conferences. Ambitious to add food writing to my roster of skills, I sat eating breakfast at a big round wooden table—all by myself.



I was without company because I didn't know a soul, but also because I'm painfully shy and will join others only if gently nudged on. This shyness is especially pronounced at the inhuman hour of 7.30 a.m. when I still consider myself a private person. Yet, despite the early hour, at the table next to me there was a major ruckus going on. When I looked over my shoulder, I saw a gray-haired lady of, how would one say, sturdy build and memorable height, sitting tall. She had the demeanor of a friendly grandma, but with a certain dry humor in her eyes, someone who could easily make everyone laugh. She too had breakfast in front of her, but there was no way she could take a bite as she was surrounded by a group of extremely energetic women clamoring for her attention at once.

> They were all addressing her at the same time, asking questions, hanging on her every word. She

took this all in stride, nodding, smiling here and there, talking to one or the other without losing her composure.

I, on the other hand, sat there completely clueless. "Who on earth is this?" I remember asking myself. Why is everyone mobbing this older lady? Eventually, I stood up and walked away not knowing whom I just had missed. Later, as the conference continued, I overheard someone mentioning the name Julia Child, adding, "Did you know she's here?" I marched on, oblivious.

Now before you judge me a space cadet, please consider my background. I had come to the U.S. only a few years earlier as a journalist, and food was not my beat. I was raised in Germany and Greece, and until the movie "Julie & Julia" few Europeans knew who Julia was and what she meant to Americans.

Well, my cluelessness would haunt me many years later. As I followed my passion and became a food writer specializing in whole grains, I immersed myself in American culinary culture. I read day and night about food. I devoured books, magazines, and newspapers—all to better understand the environment I was working in. Soon, I learned about the immense influence Julia Child had on cooking in this country.

Yet only when I wrote my own book, *Ancient Grains for Modern Meals*, did she enter my life again, sort of. In 2006, my husband and I moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and I started frequenting a small specialty shop with a huge reputation. As a newcomer to the Boston area, I was initially just as clueless about the store as I had been about Julia. The shop is Savenor's Market and it is an iconic butchery. Why? Julia not only had lived a stone's throw away and had been a loyal customer. But owner Jack Savenor had also provided her with all of the meats for her popular PBS show "The French Chef." To this day, there is a large black and white photograph of her in the shop's entryway, and her initials are edged into the sidewalk in front of the store.

When my own book came out last year, Savenor's generously hosted a book signing and cooked sample recipes from it—I felt honored beyond words. The picture we took that evening, below Julia's gaze, is one of my favorites from my book tour. But more was to come: as *Ancient Grains* was embraced by bloggers and reviewers I became a finalist for two IACP

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awards, among them the coveted Julia Child award for first book. For this immigrant writer who had struggled tremendously to translate her passion to the pages of a book written in English, my third language, this already was the honor of a lifetime. But when the eminent Jacques Pépin handed me the award, named after Julia, on April 2nd, I felt I had finally arrived in this country. Then, more than ever, I wished that I too had been part of the mob around the tall gray-haired lady at the next breakfast table.

MARIA SPECK is author of *Ancient Grains for Modern Meals*, winner of the 2011 IACP Julia Child First Cookbook Award (www.mariaspeck.com)

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