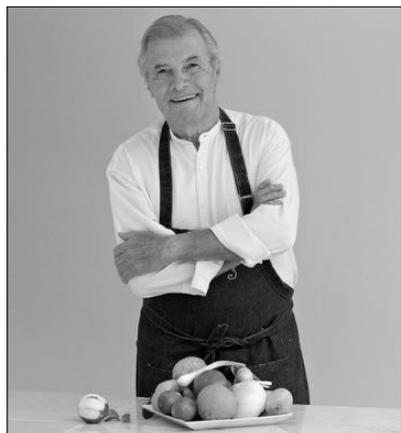


Jacques Pépin on Cooking



Jacques Pépin is a celebrated chef and educator who has authored over 20 books, including Jacques Pépin's New Complete Techniques (Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2012). He has hosted several shows about cooking on PBS, including Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home, which won an Emmy Award. He is the recipient of numerous James Beard Awards, including the Lifetime Achievement Award.

How did you first come to be in the kitchen?

Well, I was born into the kitchen in the sense that my parents had a restaurant. My brother and I would help with cleaning, or washing dishes, or peeling one thing or another. Either I was going to go be a cabinetmaker like my father or get into the kitchen like my mother. So it was a choice that I made very willingly. I thought the kitchen was exciting, with the noise, the smell, and so forth.

You were raised in France and then in 1959, you moved to the United States. Why?

I was doing very well in France. I worked in the biggest places—the Plaza Athénée, Fouquet's, Maxim's—and I even became the chef to the president. I'm saying that I had no real incentive to come to the US except for a profound desire to go like young people did. I thought that I would stay maybe a couple of years, learn the language, and go back. From the moment I was in New York, I loved it and I never went back.

Then you ended up working at Howard Johnson's shortly after moving here, being hired by Mr. Johnson directly in 1961. You wrote in the *New York Times* that it was your most valuable apprenticeship. How so?

My most valuable *American* apprenticeship, certainly. I was asked to go to the White House and, to tell you the truth, I had no idea of the potential for publicity. The cook was in the kitchen and that was the end of it. When I was with the president in France, we were never asked to go into the dining room or had anyone coming to see us. If anyone came into the kitchen it was because something was wrong! When asked to go to the White House because of the experience I had in France, I didn't want to do that and Howard Johnson represented a totally different world, a world that I didn't know anything about: a world of mass production, a world of American eating habits.

You've been involved in American food for half a century and French cuisine for decades before that. Where do you think our relationship with food will go in the future?

I don't know, but America is unique in the sense that, in France, 99% of people cook French food because that's what they are born with. The food is good and that's fine. In Italy, 99% of people cook Italian. Same thing in Spain, in Portugal, in Germany. America is quite different. People will cook Turkish one day and then they go from a Swahili restaurant to a Yucatan restaurant, then to a French restaurant, an Italian, and so forth. That situation has been created in the last 20 years or so in America; it's the most exciting country in the world because of that type of diversity.

The cook, 50 years ago when I came here, was on the bottom on the social scale. Any good mother would have wanted her son to be an architect or a lawyer, certainly not a cook. Now we are geniuses. There are 400 television shows on cooking I was told, so it's just absolutely amazing. Where will it go? I don't know, but it will never go back to the way it was. The whole food industry in this country is enormous and people are getting very, very knowledgeable.

What do you tell people who are just learning to think about food, learning to cook?

I tell people if you don't know where to start, but you know you're going to go into the food world, start in the kitchen because this is the core of it. And

whether you become a food critic or a food photographer, whatever you've learned there will be useful. It is not necessarily true if you start in another area of the food world. Food has moved into all areas, from academia to the simple bistro to food trucks.

You've mentioned that it's a good thing that we have to take time out for the pleasure of eating every day. There must also be, of course, the pleasure of cooking.

I use the supermarket as a prep cook, which is feasible now and wasn't before. I have a nonstick pan, I buy skinless boneless breasts of chicken, presliced mushrooms, and prewashed spinach, and with minimal effort, I can do a dish in 10 to 15 minutes. You can have pleasure in cooking, enjoy it, and have something nice and fresh.

That's such a good observation that the modern grocery store has become the sous chef for the home cook. Do you think our understanding of how ingredients work, the chemistry of things, has changed over the past decades?

There has been some change, why hollandaise sauce breaks down and all that, but a chef learns in a different way. The way you sharpen a knife, the way you beat an egg white, the way you bone a chicken, or the way you make an omelet is the same now as it was 50 years ago. I can walk along the stove and I can tell you the chicken in the oven is done cooking because, we say, the chicken "chante." It sings at the point that all of the juice has evaporated and the fat that has accumulated in the pan fries or "sings." It's like when you touch

a piece of meat on the grill. That steak is medium or rare, the way you want it, and you take it off.

I have been with people who are very knowledgeable about the chemistry of food and how things work, and you end up eating a lousy meal. And then you go to the little Italian mama who would have absolutely no idea of the chemistry when she cooks a dish, but you'll have the best meal in your life.

It's quite different when cooking to create recipes rather than to just cook instinctively for the pleasure of it. I write down what I'm doing when I'm cooking a dish. Then I have that set of instructions that I've written down. There is no guarantee that it is going to be the same with you. The recipe is purely a moment in time where I report what happened on that particular day, at that particular temperature.

When I give the recipe to you, you are faced with a typewritten page that you have to abide by, which is the opposite of the freedom that I had when I created the recipe. However, I tell people, when you make a recipe, you should do exactly as the recipe said, to do justice to whoever did it. If it works out, you're likely to do it again, but the second time you will take a faster look. By the third or the fourth time, you will improve the recipe by adapting it to your personal taste. The recipe is not static, it's moving. You never have the same chicken exactly, with the same amount of fat.

I teach some classes at Boston University. Everybody wants to be "different."

That's an oxymoron because you cannot do the same thing as the person next to you does because you're not that person. This is one of the paradoxes. I'll do a roast chicken, buttered potatoes, and a salad. Then they all go to the stove with an hour and a half to redo it. I tell them, "Do not try to blow my mind, by doing something different. You don't have to, because I have 15 students and will end up with 15 distinct chickens today. You cannot be the same as the person next to you. So don't torture yourself to be different. Just cook with your gut and you will be different than the person next to you."

You appeared on *Top Chef*, where you mentioned that your ideal final meal would be roast squab and fresh peas. I was curious as to why that?

Well, you know, fresh baby peas right out of the garden cooked with a small lettuce, tiny pearl white onions, butter and a dash of sugar and salt—*Peas à la Française*—it's extraordinary. And I love squab roasted properly.

To tell you the truth, "What would be the last meal of your life?" is really a stupid question because if you know you're going to die, you probably don't have much of an appetite! I said the greatest bread and the greatest butter that I can think of—it's hard to beat bread and butter. So, of course, when I said that, they said, "Well, that's great, but that's not enough." So then, all right: squab and peas. (For Chef Pépin's recipe, see <http://cookingforgeeks.com/book/peas/>.)

So good, good bread; good butter.

Extraordinary bread and extraordinary butter. Yes. Hard to beat.