Books

Culinary Picaresque

The Apprentice: My Life in the Kitchen by Jacques Pépin (Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

By
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The celebrity chef is an American creation. Often he (only very occasionally she) is a refugee from medicine or architecture or some other discipline, not a product of the long culinary apprenticeship of European tradition. He comes to public notice by opening an acclaimed restaurant, shapes his renown through newspaper interviews and television appearances, and writes pretty cookbooks meant for the coffee table, not the kitchen.

In this as in many ways, Jacques Pépin ’70GS is an exception. He was born into a restaurant family of modest attainments in Bourg-en-Bresse, a town north of Lyon famous for its chickens and for a glorious flamboyant Gothic church. He made his picaresque way to the United States by way of Paris (where he worked for the autocratic Lucien Diat at Le Plaza Athénée and the even more autocratic Charles de Gaulle at L’Hôtel Matignon, the prime minister’s official residence). Beginning in August 1959, he toiled in Manhattan under the eye of a genuine tyrant, Henri Soule of Le Pavillon. In his new memoir, amply illustrated with his own charming line drawings and photos from his own collection, Pépin tells how he grew into chefhood. Happily, the book is every bit as mellow and unpretentious as its author.

When the Soule gig ended, Pépin was offered a job as a White House chef by Joseph P. Kennedy, JFK’s father, and a job developing recipes for Howard Johnson’s, the downmarket restaurant chain. Typically he took the second, and pursued his love affair with the United States. He never moved back to France. Which is why, along with recipes for *poulet à la crème* and his mother’s apple tart, you will find specifications for New England clam chowder and Reuben sandwiches in his book. And he never did open a grand restaurant; the closest he came was La Potagerie, a

soup restaurant on Fifth Avenue that he describes as a glorified cafeteria, but which, I can tell you from personal experience, served better onion soup than most Paris bistros do. (He also lent a husbandly hand in an excellent but short-lived little place, in Madison, Connecticut, Gloria's French Café, run by his wife.)

Pépin had the great good fortune to land in the United States just as the American food revolution was gathering speed, and he came to know and work with many of its chief personalities, including James Beard, Joe Baum, who created both The Four Seasons and Windows on the World, and Alice Waters, the *patronne* of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, to say nothing of the great André Soltner, whose restaurant, Lutèce, succeeded Le Pavillon as the temple of French haute cuisine in the United States. Stories about all of them dot these pages, but the best center on his great mate Craig Claiborne, the influential *New York Times* food writer and impresario of memorable Long Island feasts in the 1960s, and on Julia Child, later his TV partner. On his first visit to her house in Cambridge in 1970, they ate pork chops and string beans at the kitchen table, but the wine was a Chambertin from the 1950s.

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