

# She brought 'food porn' to the people

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Review by  
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JULIA Child has magnificent gams. This single fact detailed on the first page of Noel Riley Fitch's biography, *Appetite for Life*, is jarring enough to make a reader reflect on why one reads the biography of a great chef. Child, like that other untouchable icon of taste and propriety, the Queen Mother, is one of those people whose sex life you really don't want to know about. Fortunately, in an age of tell-all memoirs, lurid biography and all-round TMI (Too Much Information, as the writer Christopher Hitchens has it), Fitch knows this, and except for scattered samples of Child's own delightfully bawdy humour, we are spared such detail.

This is the difference between authorized and unauthorized biography: Fitch, who was given access to all of Child's private letters and diaries, has written less a penetrating exploration of the godmother and saint of North American gourmandise than a meticulously detailed homage. Written in an odd, detached prose that is sometimes juxtaposed with hilariously florid description, Fitch attempts to narrate a sensual and culinary history of Child — exactly what the biography of a great food-lover, and indeed the prototypical food personality of our time, should be. It's an interesting, but not always engaging, work.

*Appetite for Life* takes us from Child's privileged upbringing in California ("Her appetite for food and physical exercise was larger than life"), to her years at Smith College ("She fed her ravenous hunger on brownies with chocolate sauce, toasted cheese sandwiches, and chocolate ice cream sodas"), through to her marriage at 34 to fellow food-lover Paul Child, whom she met in China ("There's something about a Chinese general vomiting loudly a few feet away that might otherwise have taken the fine edge off the bowl of eels and garlic we were eating."). A good fifth of the book chronicles the agonizingly slow writing of *The Book That Made It All Happen, Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, written with Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle. Another fifth narrates *The Show That Launched A Career*, public television's *The French Chef*.

Of course, the connection between

food and sex is one that can't be avoided completely, and it is in this connection that Fitch's fondness for food metaphors often lends itself to discomfiting shades of purple. Of Child's relationship with her husband, Fitch writes: "All those years of hunting through others' recipes for an adult life had led her to Paul," while after printing a half page of

**APPETITE FOR LIFE**  
The Biography of Julia Child  
By Noel Riley Fitch  
Doubleday, 569 pages, \$35.95

Paul Child's John Donne-like meditations on his hand, Fitch writes, "The touch of this hand taught Julia how dough feels when it is plunged into boiling oil." Can we consider this to be speculation?

Child has often been credited with helping to bring North America out of the dark ages of scientifically processed food and nutritional hysteria — Fitch has us shivering in delicious horror at the "hairnetted scientists in the lab (no cooks need apply) that destroyed American eating habits." It is true that along with writers like M. F. K. Fisher, Craig Claiborne and James Beard, Child laid the foundation for our present era of food literacy, and for this one saintly action, we should indeed sing her praises.

More than this, however, Child instigated the idea of food as spectacle, the meal as a cultural event unto itself, a moment that Prohibition, the Depression and every home economist in North America succeeded in deferring for the first half of the century. When she went on air in 1963 to teach *boeuf Bourguignon* (at the wonderfully reassuring age of 50), Child initiated our current era of food porn, the virtual reality in which you don't necessarily have to know how to cook, you just have to like looking at it and talking about it. As a self-identified educator of French bourgeois cooking, Child probably didn't plan it this way.

It brings to mind that wonderful moment from the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, when widower Tom Hanks, dating again after missing the '80s, asks his friend, played by Rob Reiner, if there is anything he should know. Reiner looks at him carefully, leans forward and drops a single



Julia Child at Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris, 1949, with mentor Max Bugnard in chef's hat. Below, Julia with fellow chef James Beard.



word: "Tiramisu." Hanks starts to panic: What is it, he asks. I need to know if some woman is going to want me to do it to her.

It is this sort of prominence of food information to which Child can consider herself mother, and Fitch is certainly attentive to the larger cultural moment. Child was one of the first

and most important instigators of our culture's present passion and curiosity for the language and culture of food. If, as the great French gastronome Brillat-Savarin wrote, the fate of nations depends on the way they eat, then we may consider Julia Child North America's Joan of Arc. With Fitch's *Appetite for Life*, Child achieves the beatification she deserves.

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## Related Reading

*Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*, by Harvey A. Levenstein (Oxford University Press, 1988).

*Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*, by Harvey A. Levenstein (Oxford University Press, 1993).

*Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, by Julia Child with Louisette Bertholle and Simone Beck (Knopf, 1961).

*The Way to Cook*, by Julia Child (Knopf, 1989).