

Books

# The Art of the Meal

James Beard Award-winning chef, television personality, and writer Jacques Pépin '70GS, '72GSAS discusses his twenty-sixth — and arguably most personal — cookbook, *Heart & Soul in the Kitchen* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

By

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Illustration by Mel Marcelo

**You're known for your illustrious culinary career, but you're also a scholar of French literature. How did you end up at Columbia?**

I came to America in September of 1959 to work at the famous French restaurant Le Pavillon. I hadn't even graduated from high school — I had been working in restaurants since I was thirteen. But I always knew that I wanted to go back to school. I happened to travel across the Atlantic on a boat with a lot of exchange students, and one night on deck I struck up a conversation with a professor, who told me that Columbia was the best university in the city. I could barely speak English then, but I took the subway uptown and asked how I could apply. After two years of preparatory courses and entrance exams, I started at the School of General Studies.

### **Why did you decide to return to a career in the kitchen?**

I never stopped cooking. I worked in restaurants for the entire time that I was studying. I even turned down a scholarship for graduate studies because it stipulated that I couldn't work more than twenty hours a week. I did ultimately start a PhD program in literature, and I might have continued down that path, but Columbia rejected my thesis proposal.

### **What was the topic of your thesis?**

It was about food, of course! The history of French food in the context of literature. My adviser — a Frenchman, no less — told me that it was too frivolous for serious academic pursuit. This was in the early 1970s; it was a different time. No one was thinking seriously about food then. Now there are entire degree programs at major universities in food studies. When Boston University was starting a culinary department, I helped to found their master's program in gastronomy — an academic discipline that thinks about food in the context of literature, sociology, and history. When I was developing the curriculum, I knew exactly where to start my research — I picked up where I had left off on my thesis. I just had to wait for America to catch up a little bit.

### **America is clearly more interested in food now. But do you think the American palate has caught up, too? I noticed, for example, that your new cookbook includes a full chapter on offal, which is probably new to many home cooks.**

When I first came to America, I remember going to a grocery store on 50th Street at First Avenue. I walked through the aisles looking for the produce section, and all they had was iceberg lettuce. When I asked where I could find mushrooms, they

pointed me to the canned goods. The change over the last few decades has been astounding. America is absolutely in a food revolution — from wine producers in California to artisanal cheesemakers and bakers — and people’s tastes are changing all the time. I notice that young chefs are increasingly interested in sweetbreads and other kinds of organ meats. Those were things that I grew up cooking and eating in France. They’re never going to be for everyone, especially if you’re not used to the taste, but I do finally feel that some of my readers are ready to try working with these kinds of ingredients.

**This will be your twenty-sixth cookbook, a companion to your thirteenth PBS television series. What do you think makes this collection distinct?**

I’ve written a lot of books that have had very specific goals. I wrote a book on budget shopping and cooking, for example, and one for the Cleveland Clinic on heart-healthy cooking. I’ve always thought of myself as a teacher first, and it’s been a pleasure to help people solve the problems that they encounter in the kitchen. But at this later stage in my career, I wanted to do something more personal. I’ve been married for fifty years, and every time my wife and I have hosted a dinner together, I’ve drawn up a menu of what we’re serving. I add some pictures — decorative drawings or paintings of the food — and have the guests sign the back, and then I put it into a binder. We now have eight or nine of those binders, and it’s wonderful to go back and remember the food and the company. Those are the recipes in this book.

**Is that where the art in the book comes from?**

Yes, that’s all mine, and I’m afraid you can blame that on Columbia, too. I took two drawing classes as electives and found that I loved it. I suppose if cooking didn’t work out and academia didn’t work out, I could have always been a painter ...

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