

Famed chef boils down his favorite recipes in a new book
and shares his thoughts on the evolution of cooking

The essence of Jacques Pépin

BY JEFF HOUCK
The Tampa Tribune

For Jacques Pépin, cooking starts and ends with technique.

How you hold a knife, how you season a dish, how you debone a chicken, how you sauté or deglaze or braise is essential to making successful meals. Without that foundation, without knowing how to bring out the best in your ingredients, all is lost.

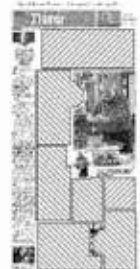
Much has changed in the six decades since he first stepped into a kitchen at age 13 as an apprentice in France. His life has taken him to the highest levels of French cooking through 25 cookbooks and 11 television series. He became, along with his dear friend and fellow TV pioneer Julia Child, one of America's foremost cooking teachers.

Chefs are rock stars now. Groceries have ingredients they never had when Pépin first came to the U.S. in the 1950s.

What has not changed are the techniques.

So when it came time to publish his latest book, "Essential Pépin; More Than 700 All-Time Favorites From My Life in Food" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$40), it was the method of cooking that emerged as a constant.

"Very often when you're a young chef, you add and add and add to the plate. ... When you get older, you start taking away from the plate to be left with the essentials of what's important."



The book pairs with a public television series of the same name, but also includes a DVD with three hours of instruction.

"The way you hold a knife or you do an artichoke bottom or make an omelet or whip an egg white is the same now as it was 50 years ago," Pépin said. "I'm excited to do the

DVD because I thought the technique would be useful for the cook to look at with the book or with any other book you have at home."

"Certainly for the chef what has changed the most is the celebrated status of the chef. (Decades ago, cooking) was not very high on the social scale. ... Now we are geniuses."

With hundreds of recipes from early cookbooks that are now out of print, the book feels like both a reunion with old friends and a bit of a victory lap. Reworked for modern cooking, the recipes link past flavors with current cooking methods. To Pépin, they mean much more.

"The recipes I have created through these years are the diary of my life," he writes. "I am, have been and always will be a cook. My culinary identity defines me."

During a recent interview, Pépin

talked about the process of re-examining his life's work and how the culinary world has changed during his career.

After 25 cookbooks and thousands of dishes you created, how did you pare it back to 700 recipes?

When I started, we had 1,800 recipes. I thought it was going to be a cinch, but it probably turned out to be more work than doing a cookbook from scratch. It took me close to three years since we started that project. I think it's interesting in some ways to see how I was doing things 25 or 30 years ago.

What criteria did you use to pare them down?

When I started, I looked and I would see that three recipes were already very similar, so I would pick one of the three. In the process of elimination, we wanted

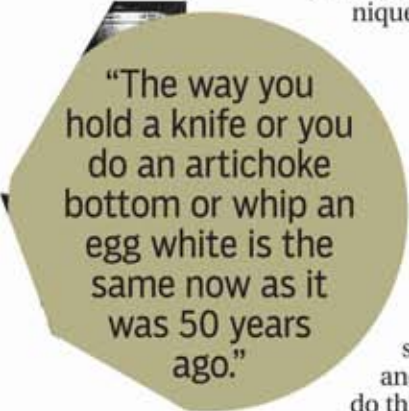
enough of this and enough of that, of poultry and fish and shellfish and to have some diversity in the book. So it was a pretty long process.

The decision then became: Do I leave it the way it was the way I did it 30 years ago to show a certain timeframe, or do I change it to make it so people can use it more in tune to the way we cook now?

So I went with the second option, and it was a fair amount of work. Some of it was less work because it was just changing the fat by using olive oil, where I used to use butter. I changed the cooking times on some dishes with fish, vegetables and even fruit. Some of them I had to redo the recipe, so it was a pretty long process.

When you went back and looked at your old recipes, were you surprised by how your cooking style changed over time?

Yes! Sometimes I was! You're absolutely right. By the same token, however, that book "Le Technique," which is still in print, I did in 1974. Certainly I don't cook the way I did in 1974, but that book is still in print because the techniques are still the same.



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I imagine when you went back you looked at the recipes and said, "What was I thinking?"

(Laughs) Of course, of course! Sometimes you're surprised positively, and sometimes you're surprised negatively and think, "How could I do this?" Other times it is, "Hey, that was pretty good!"

Why did you choose to update the recipes rather than enshrining them in one version?

Because I am very pragmatic, I sup-

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pose. I want people to use them. I want them to be relevant. I want them to be current.

How much of your reputation for ease and simplicity of your recipes comes from the fact that after World War II you had to make the most of what little you had?

But certainly the way I was raised by my mother and the food at that time when I was a child made me very miserly in the kitchen. I don't really lose anything. We use everything at my house.

The more I cook a recipe, the more I look at it in depth, the more I try to simplify it and make it so I get the essentials out of it.

Very often when you're a young chef, you add and add and add to the plate. More of this, more of that. When you get older, you start taking away from the plate to be left with the essentials of what's important.

I've seen you on shows like "Top Chef" where your advice to young chefs is that less is sometimes more.

Yes. Absolutely. There is no question about it. If you have too many embellishments and you don't have a clear idea of where you are, you lose the dish. It's not easy to keep a clear idea of what you want to do and follow it.

You write that the food world is fundamentally different from when you published your first cookbook. What is the biggest change you've noticed in terms of how you approach food and how the cooking public approaches food?

Certainly for the chef what has changed the most is the celebrated status of the chef. Thirty years, 40 years, 50 years ago, not any good mother would have wanted their daughter or son to marry a cook. That was not very high on the social



AMERICAN PUBLIC TELEVISION

Julia Child and Jacques Pépin were longtime friends and collaborators on public television cooking shows and cookbooks.

scale. It was considered a low, uninspired line of work. Now we are geniuses.

Things have changed greatly for the public as well. When I first came to America and I would go to the supermarket, there was only one type of salad. That was iceberg. That's it. There was no leek. No shallots. No Oriental vegetables. No different type of oils.

For me, the supermarkets have never been as beautiful as they are today. The paradox is I've heard

people say no one cooks anymore. Well, if no one cooks anymore, what do they do with the stuff at the end of the week in the supermarkets? Someone must be buying and cooking. I am an optimist. I think people are cooking more than they have ever done it, but in a different way.

What would Julia Child have thought of this book?

I met Julia in 1960, so we were friends for many, many, many years. But when we did shows and we worked together, we did classes for many years, she would always tell me to lighten up. People have to have a good time. She was right this way. But on the other end, she would always ask, "What did they learn today? What did we really teach?" So she was a teacher as well. I think she would really like the DVD of techniques.

Are you a better cook now than you were as a young man?

I don't know. I never thought of it this way. Maybe yes, maybe no. The proof of the pudding is on the plate and whether whoever is eating is liking it or not liking it. The best test is giving it to a kid. The kid has no compunction in telling you if it's good or if it is no good.

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HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOUI

Jacques Pépin as a 16-year-old chef in France preparing for a Fireman's Ball in Bellgarde.

Individual Chocolate Nut Pies

Serves 4

For the crust:

5 graham crackers (3 1/2 ounces)
1 1/2 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
1 tablespoon canola oil
2 tablespoons sugar

For the filling:

1/2 cup mixed nuts (pecans, almonds)

1/4 cup pine nuts
3 1/2 ounces bittersweet chocolate, broken into pieces
2 teaspoons unsalted butter
1 teaspoon cornstarch
1/3 cup light corn syrup
1 large egg, lightly beaten
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

For the crust: Process the graham crackers, butter, canola oil and sugar in a food processor for 1 minute, until the mixture is finely chopped, mealy and starting to come together.

Divide the mixture among four 1-cup ramekins or aluminum muffin cups, and press it evenly over the bottom and up the sides of each ramekin.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

For the filling: Process the pecans and almonds in the food processor for a few seconds to coarsely chop them. Mix with the pine nuts and divide among the lined ramekins.

Melt the chocolate with the butter in a bowl in a microwave oven or in a double boiler. Add the cornstarch and mix well, then add the corn syrup and mix well. Add the egg and vanilla and mix well.

Divide the mixture among the ramekins. Arrange the ramekins on a cookie sheet, and bake in the middle of the oven for about 20 minutes, until the filling is set but still somewhat soft in the middle. Let cool to lukewarm or room temperature on a rack.

At serving time, invert each of the pies onto a dessert plate. Carefully turn the pies right side up and serve.

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Butternut Squash Gratin

Serves 6

This rich butternut squash gratin is a perfect companion to a roast leg of lamb or a grilled steak.

1 large butternut squash (3³/₄ pounds)

1 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 cup heavy cream

1/2 cup grated Jarlsberg or other Swiss-type cheese

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

Cut off the stem of the butternut squash and split it in two at the bottom of the neck; this will make it easier to peel. Peel the neck lengthwise with a sharp knife or vegetable peeler, removing enough skin so the orange flesh appears. (There is a layer of green under the first layer of skin.) For the body of the squash, remove the skin with a knife by going around it in a spiral fashion. (It is easier to peel a round object in this manner.) Then cut lengthwise in half and, using a sharp spoon, remove the seeds. With the slicing blade of a food processor or a knife, cut the squash into 1/8- to 1/4-inch-thick slices.

Put the squash in a saucepan, cover with water and bring to a boil. Boil over high heat for 1 1/2 to 2 minutes, then drain in a colander; the pieces will break a little.

Transfer the squash to a gratin dish and add the salt, pepper and cream, mixing with a fork to distribute the ingredients. Cover with the cheese.

Bake for 30 to 40 minutes, until nicely browned. Serve.

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Little Corn Fritters

Serves 4 as a first course

These little fritters are a treat served with an aperitif or drinks before a meal or as an accompaniment for soup. You can prepare them a few hours ahead and reheat them on a wire rack set over a cookie sheet in a 375 degree oven for a few minutes.

1/3 cup all-purpose flour

2 tablespoons cornstarch

1/2 teaspoon baking powder

1/4 teaspoon salt, divided

1 large egg

1/3 cup ice-cold water, divided

2 large ears corn, husked and kernels cut off (2 cups)

6 tablespoons canola oil, divided

Mix the flour, cornstarch, baking powder and half the salt together in a bowl. Add the egg and 1/4 cup of the water and mix with a whisk until smooth. Add the remainder of the water and mix until smooth. Mix in the corn kernels.

Heat 3 tablespoons of the oil in a large skillet until hot. Drop 1 tablespoon of batter into the skillet for each fritter, making about 10 fritters, and cook over medium-high heat for 3 to 4 minutes on each side, until golden brown. Transfer to a wire rack (this will keep them from becoming soggy) and repeat with the remaining batter and oil. Sprinkle them with the remaining salt and serve immediately.

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