*Winter is such a good time for reading. Since coming back from my winter break in Portland, where I visited Powell’s Books at least three times and came away with an exciting collection of new reading material, I’ve spent a lot of nights curled up on my couch or in my bed making my way through their pages. Last week, I finished Julia Child’s My Life in France, so I thought I’d write up some of my thoughts on it here.*

*My Life in France* tells the story of Julia and Paul Child’s years living in Paris and Marseilles, a period of great joy and growth, especially for Julia. The book chronicles her discovery of French cuisine, her serious pursuit of a culinary education, and the process of writing and publishing *Mastering The Art of French Cooking*; all against the backdrop of the couple’s daily life and their exploration and celebration of the French way of life.

Overall, I found the book a great pleasure to read. It’s full of mouthwatering descriptions of meals and of scenes of French living in the 1950s. Julia Child’s enthusiasm for everything about her years in France jumps off the pages, and while the book definitely made me want to go to France (and eat French food!) the descriptions were so rich and satisfying that just reading them left me feeling fulfilled. In the first chapter, Julia describes her first meal consumed in France, *sole meuniére* at Restaurant La Couronne in Rouen:

*I closed my eyes and inhaled the rising perfume. Then I lifted a forkful of fish into my mouth, took a bite, and chewed slowly. The flesh of the sole was delicate, with a light but distinct taste of the ocean that blended marvelously with the browned butter. I chewed slowly and swallowed. It was a morsel of perfection.*

These vivid scenes are woven together in a way that provides a detailed portrait of Julia and Paul Child’s years abroad, and Julia’s growth from a hesitant home cook to the author of a world-changing cookbook and star of the first successful cooking show. The book is co-authored by Paul Child’s grandnephew, Alex Prud-homme, who interviewed Julia (who was in her mid-90s and waning health), looked through old letters and memorabilia with her, and wrote up each chapter for her comments and edits. Prud-homme did an amazing job at creating a narrative out of the hours of interview tape and letters that he was using as source material, and the voice of Julia is strong throughout the book. However, the final chapter (written after Julia had died) did seem a bit less embodied with her spirit. This might just be because I knew that it was written after her death, or due to the nature of the final chapter, which takes a long view reflecting back on the events of the book. This weak ending did little to temper my enjoyment of the book as a whole.

I really haven’t eaten much French food in my life, and reading this book made me anxious to explore the cuisine, both at restaurants and in my own kitchen. It also made me eager to learn cooking techniques in a more rigorous, French way, developing a groundwork of skills that can be applied to any number of different recipes. It’s interesting to compare this approach to cooking with the more free-form approach that’s often advocated by those who emphasize speed and ease in preparing meals. *Mastering The Art of French Cooking* ran counter to the emphasis on convenience and quick meals in the 1950s. While our current food culture emphasizes fresh ingredients and starting from scratch, there’s an emphasis on creativity and being able to throw things together that doesn’t come across in Julia Child’s style much at all. At the same time, I’m sure Julia would argue that a thorough grounding in the basics leaves you best prepared to experiment and to make a quick meal out of whatever you have on hand.

It’s also interesting to think about how this traditional French method of cooking relates to the current modernist cuisine movement. In one sense, both focus on a deep understanding of process, and on building blocks that can be used creatively in any number of ways. While the French method focuses on tradition and a rich culinary history, the modernist approach draws from science and often attempts to break traditional molds. It seems to me that modernist cooking is not so much rejection of traditional methods, as it is an exploration of new tools, methods, and information available to modern cooks. Perhaps Julia Child would embrace some aspects of this movement, although she would probably find some aspects rather gimmicky.

Of course all these approaches are integrated into any given cooking style, and as with so many things, the best approach is probably a combination of all three. Certainly Julia’s success was tied to her tenacity and willingness to try every slight variation on a recipe until she was confident she had found the best result, relying on a very scientific process. But the book talks about the decision to include the word “Art” in the title of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, and the desire of the authors and the publisher to convey the importance of joy, freedom, and creativity in the cooking process. Perhaps the right balance between creativity and rigor is something each cook has to find for themselves.

I already own *Baking with Julia*, a fantastically detailed and varied baking bible (although I wish it focused more on bread: most of the book is about cakes and pastries). I’m eager to get another Julia Child cookbook now, although I’m conflicted about which to choose. *Mastering* clearly holds a lot of appeal after reading so much about the process of its creation, and getting a sense of the importance of the book in changing the way Americans thought about food and cooking. In *My Life in France*, Julia says her favorite of her cookbooks is *From Julia Child’s Kitchen*, which she says she structured as a private cooking school, with each recipe providing a lesson. A third possibility is *The Way to Cook*, released in 1989, which claims to be a distillation of Julia’s life of cooking. All have ridiculously positive reviews on Amazon, and I’m sure I can’t go wrong. I only wish I were still in Portland and could head to Powell’s Books for Cooks and browse through each one before buying.

While *My Life in France* was a great introduction to French cooking, it was also incredibly inspiring to read about the Childs’ life. Julia’s pursuit of food was driven by the pleasure she got from eating, from cooking, and from experimenting. But she and Paul were both people who sought out joy and knew how to hold onto it. The book reads as a layered love story: it’s clear from each page how much Julia loved Paul, how much she loved cooking and eating, how much they both loved France, their friends, and their life together. *My Life in France* left me feeling inspired to live a life of love, to milk my experiences for all they’re worth, and to go out of my way to find joy. In my birthday card this year, my grandpa wrote, “Remember, you can never have too much fun”. I’m certain this is a statement Julia Child would have agreed with wholeheartedly.