smitten kitchen [Welcome to the second episode of the Sous-Chef Series, a sporadic feature on SK in which I invite cooks I admire over to my small kitchen to teach me — and thus, us — to make one of their specialties. Spoiler: I’m the sous! Previously: Making potato vareniki with Kachka’s Bonnie Frumpkin.] Almost without fail, the more bafflingly short an ingredient list and the more stunningly delicious the outcome, the more likely it is to rivet me. I don’t need all recipes to have 5- or 10- or fewer ingredients — I fare poorly under arbitrarily restrictive confines — but doesn’t it just blow your mind that you can make the apple tarte tatin above with only apples, sugar, butter, lemon juice, and a sheet of defrosted puffed pastry? Or, you should be able to. When made well, this upside-down apple tart looks like snug copper cobblestones on top of a rippling puff of flaky pastry. If you’re lucky, the apples will taste like they drank a cup of caramel and then napped in what they couldn’t finish. I love it enough that I’ve written about it twice (!) in eleven years but my efforts were… mediocre at best. I mean, just look at them — too thin, too sparse, too pale, apples either under- or overcooked, and way too many apples have dissolved long before the cooking time should have been up, despite being “good baking apples.” I’d begrudgingly resigned myself a life of tatin mediocrity when I spotted one of the most stunning ones I’d seen to date on a magazine stand. And I had a feeling I knew who had cooked/styled it — my across-the-street neighbor. Her name is Susan Spungen and she’s a cookbook author and food stylist and whether you realize it or not, you’ve probably admired her behind-the-scenes handiwork on movies — see: that croissant scene in It’s Complicated, oh and everything Amy Adams and Meryl Streep cooked in Julie & Julia. It was on the latter project that she got very, very good at apple tarte tatins. She explains “It was a quick shot, but I worked hard to get the right look and technique, so I could make it over and over again, and have it look exactly the same each time, which is essential for a movie scene.”