

Christi Mastley

Pain au Chocolate

“It was Julia Child who resurrected American cooking in the late 1950’s. That’s what the book says. The fact is that Julia Child just mongrelized American cuisine by mixing it up with French haute cuisine.

“James Beard, on the other hand, truly glorified American food by trusting the original recipes to work, if they were made right. James Beard. You know, I knew James Beard before he was James Beard. Back when he was still a wannabe actor. I cooked for him. Back in my Greenwich Village days. We were at the same opening night party for some miserable off-Broadway play. Bad, bad show—what was I saying? James Beard. James Beard, and we were at the same party, and I had brought these canapés, these onion sandwiches, because the director had absolutely begged for them. You take good, wheaty bread and butter it—butter, never mayonnaise—and then a half ounce of Vidalia onion, chopped, and just a touch of salt and parsley, and you garnish them with a burst of sturgeon roe. Anyway, I had made these sandwiches, and when the party ended, I went to get my tray, and James was standing there with a half-eaten sandwich in his hand. He looked at me, and he said to me, ‘What is genius? What is genius? I don’t know what it is. I can’t put a name on it. All I know is some people have it and some people don’t.’ And then he handed me the sandwich and walked away. I’ll never forget it. Just an incredible moment with me and James.” The chef wagged his head. “Some people have it and some people don’t.’ Huh.”

Day Enshaw, solitary in the front row, was taking notes. “Some have it [genius] and some don’t (James Beard).” She stopped and stared at the quote. Then she scrawled it out and wrote underneath, “Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration (Thomas Edison).”

The chef eyed her impatiently. At first, he’d been flattered by her attentiveness—the first row seat, the neat notes, the good questions she brought (in lists) to office hours. He’d thought maybe she had one of those academic crushes on him. For a few weeks, he’d welcomed her visits, playing the gentle magnanimity of a post-repentance Abelard.

She, though, played nothing and most particularly not Heloise. One day he’d looked up to find her standing in his office doorway and affably begun chatting. She’d interrupted him mid-syllable.

“You don’t need to small-talk me.” Then, in his silence, she had realized her faux-pas. “That was rude. My apologies. But of course you don’t want me wasting your time with inanities.”

Well, of course not. That was the end of his trying to be kind to the Iron Maiden.

He scanned the classroom for something to take his mind off her. There was Foster Moore, sprawled all over his desk. Now there was a good student. A crème Brule in room full of pudding cups. Boorish, undoubtedly, uncouth in his ridiculous cowboy boots and blonde dreadlocks, half-asleep in class, always the messiest cook in the lab, but also undoubtedly brilliant. He’d come into pastry school, and, in the first week, produced the lightest meringue and moistest sticky buns the chef had ever seen. He’d also discovered a rising method that produced whole wheat bread with the consistency of brioche and created his own ergonomic spatula in tinfoil.

The chef smiled kindly at Foster. Foster didn’t notice because he was trying to fly a paper airplane across the aisle to one of his henchmen. The flight aborted in the middle of the aisle. The chef longed to show Foster the goodwill Day had rejected. He strode down the aisle, jolly as St. Nick, and picked up the airplane from the crash site. “Not well-made, not well-made at all.” he chuckled to Foster, and carried the airplane back up to his lectern.

“Now, I was a good student and of course I never flew paper airplanes in class.” he said, caricaturing a scowl. “But I certainly did make a good paper airplane. People said about my paper airplanes...” He unfolded the airplane and Day caught a glimpse of writing on the sheet of paper from which it was made. The chef saw it too. Smoothing the paper out, he began to read it.

She could guess what it said. She’d heard Foster and his friends elaborating about the chef. This time, Foster had blown himself up. The chef—at least this chef—wouldn’t forgive him. Probably, he’d start slighting Foster in practicals, finding invisible flaws in the crumb structure of his baguettes and bearing down on him for bad sanitation techniques as he cooked. The chef would have to pay greater attention to her pastry, once he’d rejected Foster’s. A sense of fate grew in her mind. This was the top turning, the climatic moment which would spark her rise into her own. She waited.

The chef looked up, red-faced. “So you bet I don’t have a girlfriend,” he said to Foster, too incensed to spare himself public humiliation. “You want to throw tomatoes at me and you bet I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Beautiful, thought Day, absolutely beautiful.

Foster slid down a little in his seat. “Now, chef...”

Oh, no. You’ll never get away with it this time.

“Now chef what?”

“Man, what can I say...you know, sir, I don’t have a girlfriend either.”

No dice. Foster squirmed and tried again.

“Not all the time. I mean, I don’t want to throw tomatoes all—I think you’re misreading my airplane, sir.”

In the back of the class, someone snickered. Someone else. Then someone else. Suddenly the whole class was laughing. For a moment it could have been at the expense of either Foster or the chef, but Foster, snapping a look around, quickly joined in. Clearly, the chef was the joke.

He had opened his mouth to rain down judgment, but the laughter knocked him sideways. He looked around uncertainly. He wasn’t sure what they were laughing at. He thumped on his lectern, but edged behind it at the same time. Day almost chuckled. But then again, this was Foster’s doing. She twisted her face straight and shot a hand in the air. The chef didn’t notice.

“Excuse me. Excuse me, chef!” He turned dazedly to look at her. “Could you explain the requirements of that next paper to us, sir, before class ends?” A good question, a good student question, one that would certainly galvanize him into retaking the classroom Foster had usurped.

Foster laughed before the chef could respond. “What are you worried about? You could write that paper with your eyes closed. Ten o’clock. Class is over.” He started to get up. Then he stopped, halfway out of his chair. He was looking at the chef, who’d become a St. Helena-Napoleon in the front of his own classroom. Foster sat back down.

“Hey!” he said. “Let’s get the requirements for that paper. I gotta start working on that.” Then he fished in his backpack, pulled out a notebook and a pencil—Foster, who never took notes—and looked up at the chef with bland expectancy. Reluctantly, the class followed his suit, except for Day. She had frozen when he spoke to her.

The chef eyed Foster warily. Then, seeing nothing but sudden innocence and a new longing to learn in Foster’s face, he timidly began to describe the essay requirements. He stopped, checked Foster once again for betrayal, and, seeing him dutifully making notes, began to speak with more confidence. Day took no notes. She stared straight ahead, a pillar of non-cooperation, until she realized that Foster’s coupe was so absolute that token rebellion would only look silly. Defeated, she slid down in her chair like her spine had melted. For the first time since class had started, she let herself look at him.

He was still writing, pencil clenched in a third-grader’s lockjaw grip. That, at least, he didn’t do well. His hands weren’t meant for writing. They were built for pastry-making: gentle, to smooth butter into delicate Danishes, and quick, to spin gobs of molten caramel into sugar threads. For molding those marzipan figures of his, tiny, perfect enough to keep in a curio cabinet along with mounted butterflies and souvenir spoons. The day they’d worked marzipan, the food coloring had dyed his hands all the colors of the rainbow. His fingertips had been yellow, his knuckles blue and purple, and the insides of his wrists had somehow turned rosy pink.

That was a counter-revolutionary thought. She blinked a few times. Then, turning back to her notebook, she underlined the Thomas Edison quote to strengthen her faith.