

## Book Review

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### ***Julia Child: A Recipe for Life*, The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation, Dearborn, Michigan, United States, 20 May 2023 – 10 September 2023**

On 11 February 1963, the Boston television station WGBH aired the first episode of a groundbreaking cooking series. Called *The French Chef*, the program aimed to bring the fineries of French cuisine to home cooks with accessible ingredients and simple techniques. The woman behind the work was Julia Child, a tall, amiable personality who would transform kitchens across the United States during her long and colourful career.

*Julia Child: A Recipe for Life* explores Julia Child's life, biography, and relationships, the latest in a repertoire of immersive exhibitions produced by Flying Fish, an exhibition design company known for their travelling shows. While several Flying Fish exhibitions highlight historical material, the bulk deal with splashy subjects that embrace scientific discovery and pop-culture, from *Jim Henson: Imagination Unlimited* to *Apollo: When We Went to the Moon*. With a target audience of 'adults, families with children' and 'culinary enthusiasts', this exhibition's mandate is to 'invite visitors to immerse themselves in key ingredients of [Julia's] journey'.<sup>1</sup>

The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation in Dearborn, Michigan, was pleased to host *Julia Child's* debut. *Julia Child* is not the first Flying Fish exhibition to visit the Henry Ford; several have graced the General Motors Gallery, located near the back of the museum and used to stage temporary installations. It is a large space with high ceilings, requiring extensive use of modular walls to block out smaller spaces within.

The show is implicitly divided into four chronological sections. Entering the gallery, the first segment of the exhibition introduces Julia Child's patrician background, childhood, and early excursions with the Office of Strategic Services during the Second World War. It was through her travels that she first met her husband, Paul Cushing Child, and it was his work as an exhibits officer with the United States Information Agency that saw the couple move to France in 1948. The second section introduces Paul and his work and charts the course of Julia's interest in French cuisine: her first meal in Paris, her enrollment in culinary courses, and founding her own cooking club. A third segment introduces us to Julia's first commercial success, her cookbook *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, and the road to creating her iconic show *The French Chef*. A final area examines Julia's legacy in the culinary arts and popular entertainment.

The exhibition provides a wealth of information not only about Julia's life, but also about the importance of collaboration throughout her career. Max Bugnard was one of her influential teachers from the *Cordon Bleu* cooking school in Paris, and the women of *Le Cercle de Gourmets* gave Julia the camaraderie and supportive space to experiment with French recipes. Julia was only one of three authors of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, sharing credit with Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle, all three women jostling and moulding the contents into its final form. Judith Jones, Julia's passionate editor, was one of the driving forces behind the cookbook's publication by Knopf Press, and numerous directors and television personalities, including Jacques Pépin, ensured Julia's career was long-lived. The exhibition gives these relationships their due, but above all it highlights the importance of her romance with Paul, and their unwavering commitment to each other.

*Julia Child* communicates this information using the ingredients expected of a museum exhibition: artefacts and texts. The artefacts are mostly ephemera, including Julia's personal letters and library of cookbooks from the Napa Valley Museum in California and Harvard University's Schlesinger Library, along with a replica of Julia's cooking utensils. The use

of kitchen tables to display these materials is clever, with guests standing over them much as Julia might have as she cooked her famous dishes. This bare-bones approach may be appealing in a minimalist fashion, but to supplement this scarcity is a plethora of text panels. There are so many, in fact, that it nearly constitutes a book on the wall, and several guests visibly stooped to read them from top to bottom. In a traditional sense, the objects and text alone could constitute an exhibition. They are effective in providing educational content, but less entertaining than the exhibition promises.

Flying Fish, however, added more to the mix. While the centrepiece of many immersive exhibitions is a stunning visual impression (along the lines of *Van Gogh: the Immersive Experience*), the optics of *Julia Child* are less immersive than overwhelming. The colour palette – with swathes of teal, green, and red – while appropriately vintage, seems oversaturated, combined with the manicured photographs of Julia and others blown up to colossal scale on the walls. Much like the consumer glam of the 1960s, the atmosphere is artificial.



*Illustration 1. The entrance to Julia Child: A Recipe for Life at the Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation. Source: photograph taken by the author.*

Comfort – physical, and psychological – is one of the foundations of a meaningful museum experience (Teller 2007) but the jarring atmosphere of *Julia Child* is no impediment to visitor engagement. Interactive stations are spaced throughout the gallery, providing breathing room and mental breaks between text panels and the comparatively diminutive artefacts. Individual interactives are successful to varying degrees. On several tables sit models of food (chipped away by curious fingers, exposing the styrofoam beneath) and pots with removable lids for guests to lift and smell. The scent is periodically refreshed, but sometimes smells like nothing at all. Near the beginning of the exhibition, a vacant table is nestled behind a round wall with a street map of Paris. In a slightly unnerving scene, the disembodied voice of a French waiter identifies and ‘serves’ the dishes, with images of food in various stages of consumption projected from above.

Farther along, a photo-op is an object of amusement, where guests climb into a bathtub with a monumental image of Julia and Paul cozying up behind them. Beyond that, an immense copy of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* looms overhead. Circumnavigate the cover and you will see oversized pages projected onto its surface, randomly flipped from time to time. The next photo-op is a recreation of the studio set of *The French Chef*. Drawers and cabinets open to reveal television screens with clips from the show, the grainy video and crackling audio undeniably charming. After encountering Julia's warmth and encouragement on-screen, guests can use plastic utensils to whip up their own imaginary creations. In the corner of the 'studio' a camera records the unfolding scene, relayed to a black and white screen for other guests to see.

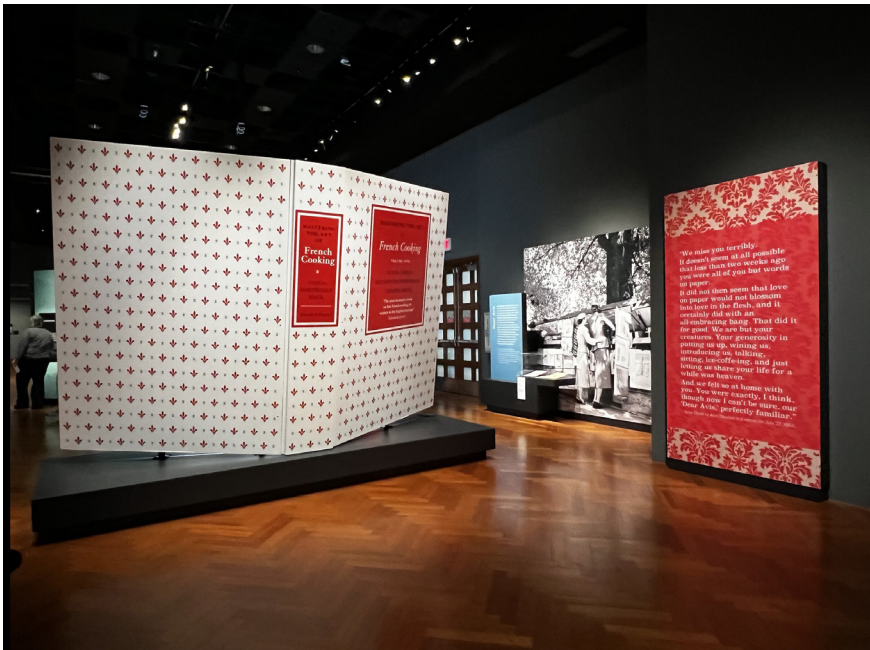


Illustration 2. A colossal edition of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Source: photograph taken by the author.

Tabletop touch screens offer guests the chance to pair Julia's dishes with the appropriate hors d'oeuvres and wine. The final opportunity for visitors to make their mark is a station where guests can type a fan letter to Julia, projected onto an adjacent wall.

While the text and ephemera succeed in bringing the titular chef's relationships into focus, the overwhelming visual appearance and assortment of interactives elicit more puzzlement than immersion. Scentsless meatpots, third-wheeling an invisible date, and observing a giant book (that is disappointingly not a touch screen) do not reinforce the message of the exhibition. Instead, the photo-ops and interactives accomplish what immersive exhibitions ultimately provide: entertainment. Families clearly bonded over these amusing activities, which present opportunities for conversation and play. Stuffed with interactives, visuals, and texts, the exhibition tries to be both a traditional exhibition and an immersive one. Put simply, there is too much to absorb.

Multiple avenues of engagement provide different visitor experiences, but this could have been accomplished using the same strategies in a more cohesive way. A striking counterpoint to *Julia Child* is *An Atlas of Es Devlin*, at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York

until 18 August 2024. Using similar immersive technologies, the exhibition is a mid-career retrospective celebrating the British designer's creative process. It begins in an enclosed room recreating her studio, where the artist explains her artistic philosophy while projected images dance across the walls and table, immersing the visitor in Devlin's way of seeing before experiencing her works in the adjoining rooms. The unfolding space is sparse and bright, with little text and only some video, centring the visitor's attention entirely on the art. Using an immersive experience as a primer for the exhibit beyond, *An Atlas of Es Devlin* makes a stronger claim to immersion and embodiment than *Julia Child* does. Even *Jim Henson: Imagination Unlimited*, also by Flying Fish, is more effective, with much less text than *Julia Child* and a common thread that runs across the interactives and the artefacts: puppetry.

*Julia Child* does not strike as an obvious subject for an interactive exhibition, but Flying Fish clearly relished the challenge of bringing her work to life. Without artefacts beyond ephemera to lean on, relying on Julia's biography and laying a trail of opportunities to embody her experience was a worthwhile strategy, but ultimately felt like two exhibitions competing in one space. Outside the trend towards immersive experiences in galleries, this recipe would not have been used. Too many ingredients, however, confuse what could have been a simpler and more effective exhibition. A traditional exhibition, incorporating all the artefacts, ephemera, and text panels (without interactives and odd visuals), would have successfully communicated the overarching theme of cooperation and partnership throughout Julia's career. An exhibition with less text, immersing visitors thoroughly in the visuals and interactives, however, would have been less demanding and more entertaining. Flying Fish attempted both at once, and as it stands, *Julia Child* bites off more than it can chew.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Flying Fish, 'Julia Child: A Recipe For Life', 2023. <https://flyingfishexhibits.com/exhibitions/julia-child-a-recipe-for-life/>

### References

Teller, A. (2007) 'Assessing Excellence in Exhibitions: Three Approaches', *Exhibitionist*, Fall 69-75.

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