

The COOK'S Magazine

JULY/AUGUST

\$3.00

THE MAGAZINE OF COOKING IN AMERICA



*Eggplant
Solanum*

*Tomato
Lycopersicum*

*Yellow Squash
Cucurbita pepo*

*Zucchini
Cucurbita pepo*

*Peppers
Capsicum*

We were late, almost four hours behind schedule due to a delayed plane and a slow drive through heavy rains along New Hampshire back roads. When we finally arrived at her mountainside home, Madeleine Kamman greeted us with impeccable Gallic charm. "We must eat first," she said. "You must be starved!" And then amid apologies for making only a simple pasta salad — a last-minute improvisation since we had missed our lunch reservation at a nearby restaurant — we began a conversation that could happily have continued far into the night. "Oh, I talk!" Madeleine readily admits, "but I have a lot to say."

Indeed she does. A French woman ("I am 100 percent French!" she exclaims) who began teaching cooking here in 1962 after her marriage to an American, Madeleine opened a professional cooking school in 1970 in Newton, Massachusetts. Attached to the school was a restaurant called *Chez la Mère Madeleine*, which opened in 1973. Despite the success of both school and restaurant, Madeleine closed them in 1979 and returned to her beloved France where she opened a professional cooking school in Annecy. She has also written three books since 1971, and a fourth, *In Madeleine's Kitchen*, will be published in September. She's back now, resettled in Glen, New Hampshire, with a new chefs' training school, called A Professional Cooking School, and a new restaurant scheduled to open in January of '85 called *L'Auberge Madeleine*. She has a reputation for being outspoken, and her opinions on cooking in France and the U.S. are as spirited as they are sincere.

COOK'S: *Why did you come back to the U.S.?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: Very simply: Would you like to live on \$500 for six months? No. But this is exactly what happened in France. I'm a Gaullist at heart; I am not a Socialist. The minute the Socialists came to power, the whole economy, everything, slipped back into the Middle Ages. When I began making money in France, I almost went bankrupt. Taxes took 85 percent of it! With the Mitterand government, there's also a definite lack of respect for the creative person. I was



Madeleine Kamman

French born but Yankee in spirit, New England's other influential cooking teacher speaks out on California grills and Boston chauvinism.

very upset to leave, and I'm not the only one — doctors, engineers, restaurateurs, the best of the country, are leaving. Everything in France is state, state, state. Chefs go to state schools where their whole education consists of mastering 112 recipes. Of course, they also apprentice in restaurants, and if the restaurant's good, they're lucky.

COOK'S: *Fortunately, there are many good restaurants in France.*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: Oh no! Finding one restaurant in France that has new, bright ideas is hard. I have a measure of comparison that most people don't, and even the current three-star restaurants aren't nearly as good as the three-star restaurants were when I was young. However, I have found one genius, someone that no one knows, a guy who has a little restaurant called *Le Marie Jean* in Amancy, a town 17 kilometers from Annecy. His name is Signoux, and his food is out of this world. The best meal I have had in France in the last five years came from this man's kitchen.

COOK'S: *You teach French cooking with*

an emphasis on provincial cooking. Why?

MADELEINE KAMMAN: I think it's important to know the origins of every dish — what is Arabic, what is Celtic, what is Latin? For example, take Brittany. There are two types of food there, the antique Celtic food and the more modern food that's made by copying classic cuisine using Brittany ingredients. And now there's a third type, which is modern cuisine and techniques also using the intrinsic ingredients of the area.

COOK'S: *Many chefs in this country are investigating our own regional cooking in an effort to establish a foundation for the "new" American cooking. Do you see a parallel between what's happening in the provinces of France and the American cooking movement?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: Yes, but there's a big difference between Americans and the French. Americans are crazy; they're nuts about their food! Especially Californians. They talk about food with six "o's" between the "f" and the "d." They talk about nothing but food. Even I am not that intense on the subject — and I've been known to be pretty intense.

COOK'S: *Why do you think this is especially true of Californians?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: Because there is everything in California. Look at the similarities between California and Provence. In Provence you have seafood, vegetables, and the dominating presence of the wine. It's the same in California. Every wine-making area has developed a wonderful cuisine — although I'm not sure they really have in California with their insistence on grilling everything. But in California there's intellectual curiosity about cooking, and there's no doubt that the pioneer mind is still at work. The young people cooking there — really all across America — are unquestionably the great-grandchildren of people who came here to find their place in the sun and to be able to express themselves. Compare American youths with French youths and you can see it. The French are dominated by the government and channeled into their life work at a much too early age.

COOK'S: *Does the French person who is not a chef, young or old, have an interest in learning to cook?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: No. They're starting to, but because there are so many levels of cooking in France, it's happening slowly. Usually when a French woman has enough money, she will hire a cook rather than do it herself.

It's always been true, I think, that the miracles in cooking happen at the level of poor women. They create wonderful food from nothing. This was true in America, too, but America lost it and has only begun regaining it in the past five or six years. As a French woman, it's difficult for me to understand why American women, who were very independent in pioneer times, became dependent. The pioneer woman was extraordinary; she was the soul of survival. Both World Wars had a lot to do with it. The women were sent to factories to work and then sent home after the War to make babies. When the feminist movement came, a lot of women were frightened by it. I am a feminist, and my own battle, for women in professional kitchens, is still on.

I was a pioneer in this area. And I took the brunt of the criticism. My reputation for being a "tough cookie" comes from the fact that I had to establish myself — and do it in Boston. Imagine a city full of Brahmins understanding me! They are people who are used to having their women sit at home like princesses and hire people to work for them. Here comes a French woman who opens a restaurant which becomes the best restaurant in Boston, maybe in the United States at the time. It was rough.

The feminist movement shook women at their foundations. It did me, when I realized I had been cast into a mold. While I was getting out of that mold and into my own kitchen and doing my own food, I was yelling and screaming because I felt frustrated [by not being far-

ther along in my career]. When I sold the restaurant in 1979, I was wiped out, exhausted. I needed to return to my roots, to go to France.

COOK'S: *What was there about your food that made it different?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: I was trained as a classic cook, but in the early '70s, I decided classic cooking was too complicated. I started to stir-fry vegetables, to take flour out of sauces. I wanted to clean up that mass of classic stuff that gave you such ponderous food. Even in France today, bourgeois cuisine is what's left of classic cuisine. They still use their béchamel and espagnole sauces. They're just starting to use reductions and essences.

COOK'S: *What was the original inspiration for your style of cooking?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: My dear mother and aunts! They used to cook very simple food, with maybe three elements. Cod, potatoes, and garlic, for instance. It's a wonderful trinity of ingredients, there's salt, flavor... the blandness of the potato compensates for the saltiness of the cod. My mother never put flour in a stew. She'd use a veal bone for gelatin. Because of this, by 1970 I had decided to do everything based on veal stock. And consequently I get those wonderful shiny sauces.

COOK'S: *As a teacher, how do you spot a good cook?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: Some people simply have it. Just as Mozart could put music down on paper, there are cooks who can put ingredients together instinctively. I can spot the geniuses, they're rare and difficult to teach because they want to do things their own way. Still, when I teach, I stress techniques. I spend half the time on them because without them, you can't cook. Once the techniques are mastered, then they [the students] can go off the recipe. There are always those students who absolutely refuse to go off the recipe, and unfor-

tunately there's nothing I can do about that! I want my students to create, even though nothing is really new. What can we invent after 4,000 years of Western civilization? For instance, a while ago I decided to combine saffron and basil in a dish. Something told me I needed some orange or it wouldn't work. But even though I was right, it's not new. What is in bouillabaisse? Basil, saffron, and orange.

COOK'S: *When you, as a French woman, think of American food, what first comes to mind?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: Lobster with butter. There's nothing better.

COOK'S: *Does it have to come from Maine?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: It's the best! When I first arrived here, I was served a whole lobster, instead of a slice of tail and maybe half a claw, which is a portion in France. I couldn't believe it. I looked at it and said, "Is this all for me?" Since then I've learned. And corn, wonderful corn just poached in water. That's American food at its best. America's culinary roots are here — use them! They won't go away. In New England there are beautiful hams baked with maple syrup. And Southern food is wonderful. Americans should relax and appreciate their foods.

It's no more possible here to establish an "American" cuisine than it is in France to establish a single French cuisine. There are too many differences in this big country. Yet in the U.S. you can't escape the blanket of being English. White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants run the country, and so many social customs are based on the English way. This gives the emotional Latin like me a hard time!

COOK'S: *But how does that affect the food in the U.S.?*

MADELEINE KAMMAN: I think that's the one thing it affects the least. People continue cooking the way their mothers did, and always will. — *Mary Goodbody*

