


Seasonal Pantry: A tribute to French chef Madeleine Kamman

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In July, as many local food lovers were still reeling over the death of Anthony Bourdain on June 8, the world lost two more culinary greats.

Jonathan Gold, who won a Pulitzer for his brilliant criticism of Los Angeles restaurants, passed away shortly before his 58th birthday from pancreatic cancer. Part of Gold's expertise was the way in which he brought out-of-the-way ethnic restaurants into focus. Craving Korean? Gold was your guide if you lived in the southland.

The other loss was Madeleine Kamman, chef, restaurateur, teacher, historian and feminist, who was 87 when she passed away at her home in Vermont, where she had struggled with Alzheimer's disease for about a decade. Among her best known students is Gary Danko, currently of Restaurant Gary Danko in San Francisco. He studied with Kamman for years and honed his culinary skills at Chateau Soverain, where Francis Ford Coppola Winery and its restaurant Rustic sit today.

The loss is personal and universal, as she was both a friend and someone who deepened the skills and understanding of hundreds of chefs around the country, many of whom were already successful.

For a time, Kamman was a big presence in the North Bay. She co-founded the School for American Chefs at Beringer Vineyards in St. Helena, which is where we met. Each two-week session included four chefs, and I was lucky to attend a session in the spring of 1990.

Kamman, more than any other person, instilled in me a deep appreciation for wine in all its glorious nuances. That knowledge, in turn, transformed my cooking.

She was an extraordinary technician, with skills that were informed by a deep understanding of ingredients, techniques and history. The most memorable moments of those two weeks took place in the classroom, not the kitchen, where she explained everything from pre-history and the discovery of fire to how molecular properties and functions shape cooking. More than once, she

took my breath away with her insights.

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One day, after classes were finished for the day, she felt a need for exercise and asked me to join her. During the walk, she spoke of the depredations she had to endure during World War II, of combing the land for wild greens, a straggling chicken, a few random eggs. She also spoke of the physical abuse she suffered at the hands of a male relative and of the family winery and vineyards lost during the war. She was thoughtful, introspective, vulnerable and even a bit fragile, offering me a glimpse into her heart and into the passion — a passion to survive, a passion to overcome those terrible years — that fueled her work.

If I had to choose one adjective to describe Madeleine Kamman, it would be fierce. No matter the topic, her focus was laser sharp. She was intolerant of laziness, of shortcuts, of excuses and of inferior results. She was a strict taskmaster and could even be cruel if she thought the situation warranted it, though confrontations always ended with kindness and even love.

She was also a fierce feminist. When famed French chef Paul Bocuse announced that a woman's place was in bed, not in a professional kitchen, she displayed an upside-down photograph of him in the dining room of her Boston area restaurant, Chez La Mere Madeleine, and later acknowledged his grandmother and mother in the dedication of her groundbreaking book, "When French Women Cook" (MacMillan Publishing, 1976). She believed that Bocuse and other male chefs in France had built their careers on the work of their French grandmothers, without ever acknowledging them.

During her culinary career, Kamman wrote seven books: "The Making of a Cook" (1971); "Dinner Against the Clock" (1973); "In Madeleine's Kitchen" (1984); "Madeleine Cooks" (1986); "Madeleine Kamman's Savoie: The Land, People, and Food of the French Alps" (1980); "The New Making of a Cook" (1997); and "When French Women Cook," which explores, in depth, the cooking of seven French women.

All of the books reveal her profound intelligence, attention to detail and understanding of the history of French cooking yet also are informed by her life in the U.S. and contemporary trends. For example, she embraced the fat phobia of the 1980s and 1990s with surprising enthusiasm.

After retiring from The School for American Chefs in 2000, Kamman returned to the East Coast to

be closer to her two sons and her grandchildren.

She also, for the most part, left the culinary world. One of the last times we spoke, it was for an article about her Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Association of Culinary Professionals.

"I've worked with food for 36 years. That's enough," she said at the time. "I want to go back to school. I'll probably concentrate on the 18th century, the richness of thought, of the art of living.

The world we live in is a result of that time and those ideas. What went wrong? What's gone right? The rights of man were developed then and look how low we've gone."

This recipe is from the chapter entitled "Claire" in "When French Women Cook." Claire cooked in the Touraine region of France, and Kamman first met her in 1940.

Strawberries Steeped in Red Wine (Bijane aux Fraises)

Makes 6 to 8 servings

1 quart ripe strawberries

3 dime-size pieces of lemon rind

— A squeeze of lemon juice

3-4 tablespoons honey, or to taste

1 bottle Chinon wine or other light to medium bodied red wine

1 cup heavy cream, whipped (optional)

1 ounce Cointreau (optional)

Clean the strawberries; wash them carefully. Put them into a bowl with the lemon rind, the lemon juice and the honey.

Toss well to dissolve the honey. Let stand 10 minutes. Add the wine and let steep another ten minutes. Add more honey if you desire. Serve in Champagne cups. This dish is never refrigerated because the cold deadens the fragrance of the berry-wine mixture.

If you wish to use the cream, add the Cointreau to it, a little honey, if you wish, and beat until semi-stiff. You can either top each cup of berries with some of the cream, or, better, pass a dish

containing the cream and let your guests help themselves.

Michele Anna Jordan is the author of 24 books to date. Email her at michele@micheleannajordan.com.

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