



A Trio of Memories

A bowl full of Molto Mario, a cup of L'Oustau de Baumaniere, best friends and a dash of Julia—what do you get? A casserole of chef memories from globe-trotting writer Leslie Andrea Westbrook.

I find cooking—at least at home, alone—to be a meditative, contemplative, pleasurable endeavor. A quiet time at day's end to focus and relax, over a chopping board and my warm oven, after slaving over a hot computer all day. Not only is cooking relaxing, but also my efforts are followed by edible rewards. So it seems almost ironic that chefs I have known, admired and even adored have often displayed bigger-than-life personalities. Working alone in the kitchen is much different than the frenetic pace of cooking with a team in a commercial setting, to put it mildly. Perhaps that is part of the reason for some bigger-than-life personalities in the field of professional cooks.

Fun-Loving Guy

One of the first chefs I became pals with was the vivacious Guy (pronounced ghee, like the butter) Leroy (la-WAH) when he was the chef at El Encanto hotel (now Belmond El Encanto) on Santa Barbara's Riviera in the early 1980s.

Before coming to El Encanto, Guy worked with 40 people in the "brigade kitchen" at the Plaza Athenee in Paris (1971), but he began his career in Les Baux-de-Provence at the legendary L'Oustau de Baumaniere. He apprenticed there under Raymond Thuilier alongside Austrian Wolfgang Puck, with whom he forged a lifelong friendship. Of course,

Wolfgang became world famous, but Guy, a Frenchman, was no less talented. Guy went to work at the Hôtel Plaza Athénée and then joined Wolfgang at Maxim's.

They moved together to America, where they cooked at Le Tour in Indianapolis, but left the cold Midwest climes for the popular-with-the-stars Ma Maison in Los Angeles. Then Guy “ran away” to Florida.

“There was nothing there [in Florida], I was so bored,” Guy recalled on a cross-continental call, “so I went to The Mansion at Turtle Creek in Dallas.”

Chef Guy told Chef Wolfgang, “I’m coming back to California!” It was so funny, I was helping Wolf make a dinner at El Encanto to sell his first book and Wolfgang told [El Encanto owner] Eric Freiden that I was opening a restaurant in Santa Barbara!”—which was far from the truth, Guy laughs. That same day Eric said, “Why don’t you work here?”

“I told him, ‘Your restaurant needs a lot of work! It looks like 1950s and has never been remodeled, but the view and location are beautiful!’”

“The kitchen and decor was pretty scary! I said I’d like to work here, but you have to promise we can redo the kitchen and the restaurant. Eric said, ‘Absolutely!’ And we did it!” the chef recalled.

That’s when I met Guy—who was El Encanto’s executive chef from 1980 to 1984.

For one of the first meals that Guy prepared for me at El Encanto, he came out in his chef’s uniform, with a wide grin on his face, carrying an entire fresh fish he was about to scale and cook for our table.

He also created special menus—and named dishes for his favorite patrons. One day, there was a “Salade Leslie” on the menu; probably the first and last time I’d have a dish named for me by a chef. I’m no Anna Pavlova, but it was a sweet and delicious surprise. Who wouldn’t love a chef that did that?

Consequently, Guy and I became pals.

On days off, he would appear at my home (at that time, I was living in a condo at the SB Polo Fields and, as Guy reminded

me, driving a vintage red Ferrari 330 GT 2+2) carrying beautiful picnic baskets laden with French Champagne, stinky French cheeses, fresh baguettes and other edible treats.

One day, Guy invited me to join him on a jaunt to Los Angeles. We were going to the newly opened and very “hot” Spago in 1982 to meet his good friend “Wolfie” and Wolfgang Puck’s then-wife, Barbara Lazaroff. Our evening lasted into the wee hours of the morning with the four of us driving from the

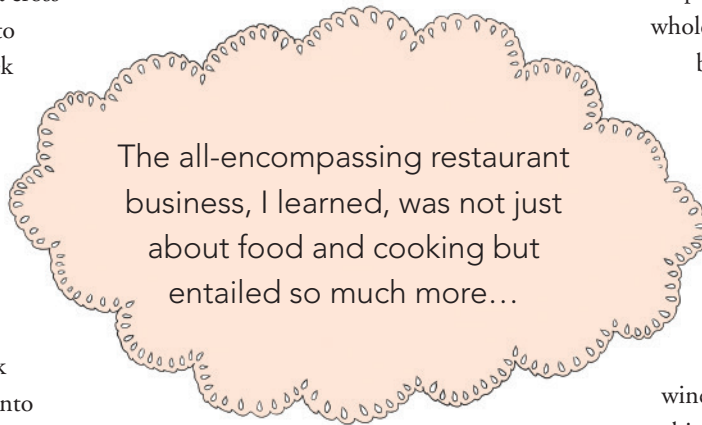
Sunset Strip restaurant to downtown LA’s wholesale flower market to buy huge blooms for Spago’s fantastical décor created by Barbara. The all-encompassing restaurant business, I learned, was not just about food and cooking but entailed so much more, including flower shopping, long, long hours and always lots of good wine—or Champagne, if Guy had anything to say about it!

Guy left Santa Barbara to cook at other hotels, restaurants, open his own restaurant in Florida and work as a private chef. Old timers and those who remember the always-smiling, indefatigable Guy Leroy can find him on Facebook, now retired and living in Florida after a long stint of gigs as a private chef for the rich and famous and stories about working in Las Vegas that must remain in Vegas!

Bad-Behavior Batali

Molto Mario Batali is another story. I also met this chef in a Santa Barbara hotel dining room. In 1989, Batali was a 29-year-old sous chef at the Four Seasons Biltmore in Montecito. I had an amazing lunch in the now-shuttered dining room with a very persnickety friend. When the talented redheaded chef came out to greet us we showered him with well-deserved compliments.

Soon after, I wrote a short profile about the wild, motorcycle-riding, African-mask-collecting chef and submitted it to Ruth Reichl, food editor at *The Los Angeles Times*, for publication consideration in the days of typewriters and paper submissions. My profile/pitch was returned, with pencil edits and notes in the margins from the now-famous author/editor that said something to the effect of “Who is this chef and why should we care?” Somewhere in my “archives” is



buried this precious treasure that has caused me many a giggle over the years as Batali's star rose—and then crashed and burned.

Was I prescient? No. I just recognize great cooking. When Batali went to Italy (1989–91) to refine his craft in a 24-seat, seafood-only restaurant outside of Bologna in Borgo Capanne, he invited me to come visit him. I spent a couple of weeks as a guest at Mario's apartment, not far from Bologna, in the Po Valley that would become the inspiration for his Restaurant Po in Manhattan. I wandered on my own a lot, watching the local men play checkers or cards at tables in the shade on warm summer afternoons; their wives and mothers sequestered inside their homes, more than likely ironing and preparing evening meals. Mario whirled in the restaurant kitchen day and night, popping back home for an afternoon nap (and a mostly empty refrigerator, as I recall) before returning to cook for the dinner crowd.

In Italy, Mario worked hard, napped and played bad rock 'n' roll with some local lads (as a daughter of a jazz pianist I avoided that noise as much as possible).

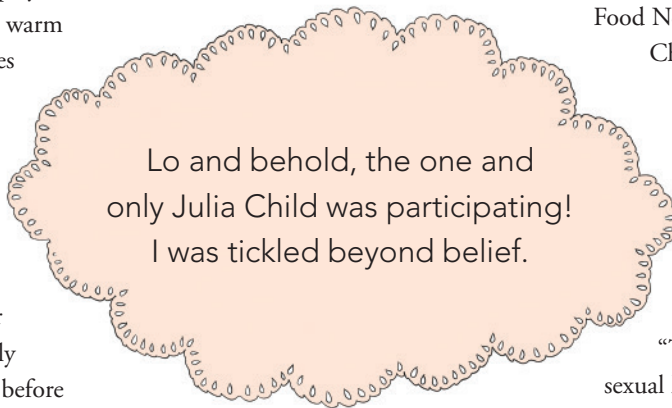
In the Big Apple, Molto Mario lived large. In 1992, the 31-year-old Mario arrived in NYC with \$200, a duffel bag and a guitar, according to one press account.

Years later, my mother called to tell me that she'd just read a "huge profile with a full-page photo of Mario" in *The New Yorker*, noting, "You could have married him!"

"The Secret of Excess—How a Life Became Cooking" by Bill Buford (August 2002 issue) provided a small glimpse of MM's behavior once he hit the Big Apple and became famous.

"Yes, dear Mother, I probably could have," I responded, "but I would have had to sleep with him!" I didn't have a romance with Mario, although I believe he would have welcomed one. He never acted inappropriately with me, perhaps because, as fate would have it, I had fallen in love with a Frenchman back home in California right before I traveled to Italy.

I saw Mario again in New York when he invited me to Restaurant Po. I had met a young Brazilian student in Rockefeller Plaza (who ended up becoming a lifelong friend), so I dragged him along with me to the restaurant. We rode the bus downtown singing "The Girl from Ipanema" in Portuguese (him) and English (me) and delighted in a tasty meal—as Mario's guests.



My friend Luis Scalioni remembered his meal from 20 years ago perfectly: "I had a tower-shaped watercress salad—Mario used the stems to make a spiky tower—with goat cheese and deer meat. It was the first time I'd had goat cheese or deer meat [venison] in my life!"

On another occasion, I ran into the redheaded hurricane—who would go on to own 26 restaurants, win a few James Beard Awards, grace a lot of magazine covers and appear frequently on national television—at The Miami Book Fair. He was very full of himself and bragged about the power of television, as he had become a star thanks to The Food Network (1997) and later, on "The Chew." That was the last time I saw Molto Mario in the flesh.

One doesn't hear much about Mario anymore. The thing that made him famous—the "power of television"—also contributed to his downfall.

The disgraced chef was fired from "The Chew" in December 2017, after sexual harassment allegations surfaced and a few months later the television show was canceled after Batali was under criminal investigation for sexual assault.

I felt a tinge of sadness seeing Mario, once a fun and generous friend, now fallen from grace, contrite and haggard in a Boston court video during his arraignment.

Mario's public and court fate still awaits him. At this writing, he still faces prison time for sexual misconduct he's plead not guilty to. Try to find something about Mario today on the Food Network website, and he's been scrubbed clean like a dirty saucepan.

Beloved Julia

I first met Julia Child in her beloved Boston. I was struggling to make a living as a freelance writer in Manhattan in the mid-1980s. A few fellow scribes and I were invited to a "Cook with the Chefs" event for the launch of the then-new Boston Harbor Hotel.

The hotel flew me to Boston for the day where I met the other journalists in the hotel kitchen. We were promptly handed aprons, embroidered with our names, and instructed that we would be preparing lunch with the hotel chefs. Lo and behold, the one and only Julia Child was participating! I was tickled beyond belief.

We were each assigned a chef. I was paired with a tall, good-looking Swedish pastry chef and we made cream puffs. One and all worked diligently on our dishes that we served and shared around a table in the hotel kitchen.

After meeting Julia, I pitched a story about her to a New York magazine and nabbed the assignment! I wrote her a letter (this was still the days of snail mail), with a doodle at the bottom. I received a most gracious reply, letting me know that she was on a book deadline and unavailable for an interview, while complimenting me on my cat drawing. That letter, embedded in my memory, is also buried somewhere in my archives.

When I moved back to Santa Barbara (after two and a half long, cold winters in New York), Julia was living in Montecito. We met again, at an event at the Four Seasons Biltmore. She could not have been kinder or friendlier. What always sticks with me about this gracious, talented and amusing woman was her curiosity in others. No ego, no blah-de-dah, no bragging, but a genuine interest and curiosity in others.

My most cherished memory of the late, great Julia Child is this: I was not only invited, but had the honor of being seated next to the grande dame of French cooking for one of her many, many 90th birthday parties held across the land. We had so much fun, chatting, laughing and eating at the lively and lovely fete in the Carpinteria garden of hostess/artist Rise Delmar Ochsner. When it was discovered that Julia needed a ride home to her apartment at Casa Dorinda, my boyfriend at the time, Erik Johnson, and I jumped at the opportunity to play chauffeur.

One of the guests brought Julia 90 beautiful roses, one celebrating each year of her remarkable life. We filled the back of Erik's Volvo station wagon with the 90 roses and tucked Julia safely in. When we arrived at Julia's Casa Dorinda apartment and she invited us in, there we were—face to face with the kitchen Julia cooked in and her famous pegboard for hanging pots and pans.

Julia plucked a handful of the bountiful roses and told us to take the rest home. I filled Erik's Summerland cottage with roses in vases here, there and everywhere and photographed them for posterity. Yes, Julia has a rose officially named for her, but I call these Julia's birthday roses.

• • •

When I am alone, back in my quiet kitchen, leaning over a warm pot and inhaling the fragrant herbs and aromas, I am not really alone. I have my memories of those who make a living from cooking to warm my heart and soul. This keeps my mind occupied and my imagination whirling and thinking, "What might they be cooking tonight?" 🍷

When not traveling on assignments, meeting writing deadlines or cooking and reminiscing, **Leslie Andrea Westbrook** consults and helps private clients around the globe sell fine art, antiques and collectibles (including fine wine) at international auction houses. She can be reached at LeslieAWestbrook@gmail.com or 805 220-6773

Now Open!

ella & louie flowers

weddings, events, and every day

240 E Highway 246, Suite 105, Buellton
10a-4p, Tuesday to Friday and by appointment

www.ellaandlouie.com




Visit Our Tasting Room
300 North 12th Street - Unit 1A
Lompoc, CA 93436


kitawines.com   805.819.1372

GOURMET OLIVE OILS & VINEGARS

SOLVANG OLIVE

Locally grown and handcrafted goods
made in California.

SolvangOliveCo.com · 1578 Mission Dr., Solvang



TECOLOTE BOOK SHOP

Since 1925

1470 EAST VALLEY ROAD (UPPER VILLAGE OF MONTECITO)
805 969-4977

GIFT WRAPPING • SHIPPING • SPECIAL ORDERS • BOOK SEARCHES
AUTHOR APPEARANCES