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# There's the Wrong Way and Jacques Pépin's Way

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WHEN Jacques Pépin slices a baguette, there is a distinct sound that seems to be imbued with six decades of experience in the kitchen.

The knife goes through, and you hear a little *schloomp*.

By contrast, many amateur cooks keep their knives far too dull, he said, and have a habit of crunching the blade downward on the crust, like a handheld cider press, which only squishes the white interior of a baguette into a fluff-less layer.

“Instead of going down and forward, people press down like this,” Mr. Pépin said, standing at his kitchen counter last week. “That way, you have to reinflate each piece with a little pump.” Then he demonstrated a faulty technique that I recognized, with silent embarrassment, as my own.

I had traveled to Mr. Pépin's house in this Connecticut town, just east of New Haven, to talk about all the little details that go into the precision and majesty of that little *schloomp*. In other words, our topic was technique.

This month marks the arrival of “Essential Pépin” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, \$40), a cookbook that gathers together hit recipes from the arc of his career, from his childhood deprivation in France during World War II and his teenage apprenticeship in an array of French restaurants to his eventual ascent to fame as one of the first chefs who went on television to teach Americans to cook.

The book, his 26th, comes with an instructional DVD, coincides with the start of a new 26-episode TV series of the same name, and overflows with more than 700 recipes.

At the root of each one lies a deep-tissue database of skills that can't be picked up by flipping a few pages. In case anyone needed a reminder about the importance of technique, Mr. Pépin himself had hand-painted tiles in his kitchen with mantralike slogans: “Great cooking favors the prepared hands” was one. “A great chef is first a great technician” was another.

“All the great chefs I know — Thomas Keller, Jean-Georges Vongerichten — they are technicians first,” said Mr. Pépin, 75.

Some of them, in fact, picked up that technique from Mr. Pépin himself. Tom Colicchio, the chef behind Craft and other restaurants, remembers receiving Mr. Pépin's standard-setting 1976 book, "La Technique," as a gift from his father when he was a budding 15-year-old cook in New Jersey. "It changed the way I looked at food and thought about food," Mr. Colicchio said. "You felt like someone was looking over your shoulder teaching you how to do these techniques."

He set aside books full of recipes and focused on teaching his fingers the true tricks of the trade, honing his knife skills and simmering chicken bones to make stock. Looking back, Mr. Colicchio compares it to playing the guitar: learning to play one song doesn't mean you've mastered your instrument. "Once you learn the technique, then you can be a creative cook," he said.

And yet in this age of exploding gastronomic consciousness, with entire television channels devoted to cooking, people seem all too eager to sidestep the rigorous monotony of basic manual dexterity in order to leap right into expressions of creativity.

That can grate on Mr. Pépin, especially when he finds himself teaching a room full of students who are restless to get ahead to the superstar-chef part. (He is a dean at the French Culinary Institute in Manhattan.)

"You have no choice as a professional chef: you have to repeat, repeat, repeat, repeat until it becomes part of yourself," he said. "I certainly don't cook the same way I did 40 years ago, but the technique remains. And that's what the student needs to learn: the technique."

To that end, my morning lesson with Mr. Pépin didn't begin with food. It began with knives. A cook should have knives, he said, that glide with quick, delicate ease through the skin and pulp of a ripe tomato.

"People always ask me, 'What is the best knife?' " he said. "I say, 'A sharp one.' "

I thought about when I had last sharpened the knives in my kitchen. Then I remembered: never. In the course of two decades of delusionally casting myself as a decent cook, I had sharpened my knives not once.

If Mr. Pépin was appalled, he was too gracious to show it. He simply grabbed a sharpening steel and demonstrated how to run a knife blade along the wand, which he did without flicking his wrist. "Like a conductor," he said. "You have to keep the angle constant."

That angle needs to be about 20 or 30 degrees in relation to the steel. You can pull the knife toward you, across the steel, or away from you, but the point is to strive for uniformity.

For knives that are in truly sorry shape, one needs a sharpening stone. He placed one atop the counter and smeared it with some mineral oil. Then he began to run the blade of a knife along the oiled stone.

The motion was not at all like, say, slicing steak. Mr. Pépin drew the edge across the stone in a single long sweep, repeated over and over, as though he were skimming the oil off the surface.

Now and then, he would dab it with a rag to wipe away the black residue. “I have to keep it clean, otherwise the stone won’t be abrasive anymore,” he said. “If I spend 15 or 20 minutes here, I will create a new edge. If the knife’s in really bad shape, that’s what you do.”

His knife was in very good shape.

To prove it, Mr. Pépin began, with great alacrity and élan, to cut things. There was that *schloomp* through the bread. He minced some onion. He peeled the skin of a tomato and made a rose out of it.

“For me, what I mean by technique is almost what you might call a sleight of hand,” he said.

Famously averse to waste, Mr. Pépin skinned an apple and left the peel on the cutting board. “You can dry that out in the oven and make tea,” he said. “It’s supposed to be good for your kidneys. We don’t throw anything out.”

What I tend to waste in my home kitchen is time. Just peeling and mincing a clove of garlic seems to eat up a month. But Mr. Pépin’s technique with garlic was a small miracle of deftness and economy.

He placed a whole head of garlic on his cutting board, upside-down, and held it at a slight angle. He popped it hard with the base of his palm. The cloves went scattering like marbles. He sliced off the stem of one (“that will make it much easier to peel,” he said) and smashed the clove under the flat blade of his knife. The skin slipped off like a silk robe.

He smashed the skinned garlic again, to release the essential oils, placing it under the flat of his knife and banging the blade with his hand. “At this point, I can chop it,” he said. He now did so by rocking the knife back and forth over the flattened clove. He kept the knife steady by placing the fingers of his left hand on top, guiding the knife up and down in a semicircle across the cutting board as if it were the hand of a clock.

“And I have purée of garlic,” he said.

An omelet was next.

Now, if there is any realm of cooking in which I feel a twinge of confidence, even cockiness, it is eggs. When I scramble them, I bring tenderness and precise timing (and tons of butter) to the equation, and the results are consistently impressive.

Nevertheless, I was prepared to be shamed. I confessed to Père Pépin that my concept of an omelet probably qualified as heresy: beat the eggs, pour them into a hot pan, let them set and brown a bit, and then fold the flaps over a few random gobs of goat cheese.

Mr. Pépin’s brown eyes took pity on me. “There’s nothing wrong with that,” he said kindly. “Sometimes I’m in the mood for that type of omelet.”

It’s just not really a French omelet, that’s all.

A proper French omelet is all about (you guessed it) technique. He grabbed a selection of backyard eggs provided by a neighbor and cracked three on his cutting board, not against the rim of the mixing bowl. (This, he said, prevents any bacteria on the surface of the shells from getting into the bowl.)

He dropped clumps of salt and pepper and chopped chives and tarragon into the bowl with the three eggs, and then, using a fork, he began to beat the eggs with notable brio. “People tend to turn it like a wet mop,” he said. “You have to break the whites so that there aren’t long strings of the white showing.”

He had agitated the eggs so fiercely that there was now a flotilla of bubbles on their surface.

That mixture went into a buttered nonstick pan; the heat was turned all the way up. What followed was a kind of Tilt-A-Whirl shaking and spinning and scraping of the pan, with Mr. Pépin keeping the eggs constantly in motion. He’d shake the pan like a tambourine, then stop and very quickly scrape off the papery edges of egg that would slosh up the sides, then shake again.

“I move this as much as I can, as fast as I can, so it’s the smallest curd possible,” he said. “I don’t let it brown on the top. Because browning will indicate that it has toughened the albumen.”

There was barely a second when the eggs sat idle in the pan, and that was the point. The omelet, when finished, was meant to have a consistent tenderness, inside and out.

He finished with a flourish that involved shifting the eggs to one side of the pan, tilting the pan up and using a fork to roll the still slightly wet mix into an oblong shape. His description of this, in “Essential Pépin,” sounds much easier than it looks: “Roll the omelet by folding over one side and then the opposite side, and invert it onto a plate.”

Alas, in the kitchen, there’s a lot more nuance to it than that. Even though I’d watched the whole thing up close, I knew I could not do what he had just done. But I knew I could master the next step.

“What you have to do now,” he said, “is eat that omelet with some [salad](#).”



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