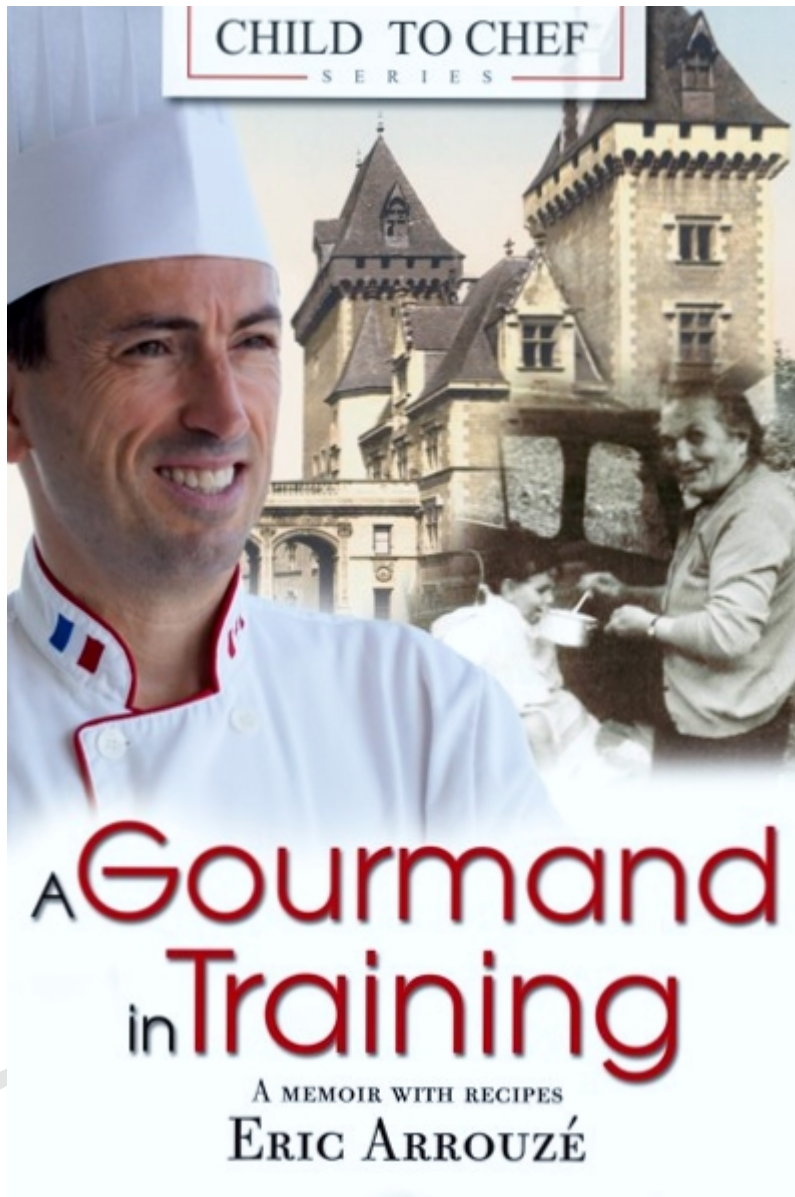


This is a chapter extracted from the book:

A Gourmand in Training

by Eric Arrouzé.

The book is for sale on Amazon.



Everyone else in my family has plans for Saturday afternoon. My brother leaves for his running club, Les Aigles de Pau; my sister meets with friends; and Dad travels to a construction site, a fact of life for a laborer who must work weekends to help pay for his children's education.

Fine with me. I have Mamie all to myself as she removes the central hotplate from her wood stove so that she can add a couple of dried logs to the dying embers. I see yellow flames rapidly hop and dance through the stove top opening.

Before reaching for the poultry, Grandmother entrusts me with one of her secrets for making excellent *poule au pot*: Always buy a mature chicken, but not more than two years of age, otherwise the flesh will be too tough.

Mamie takes the chicken out of the refrigerator and plucks the few visible feathers left on the bird. Once that task is done, she grabs the feet with one hand and the head with the other and swiftly stretches the chicken across the leaping flames, which lick the skin and burn off any remaining down feathers. The operation is tricky because some parts of the chicken are hard to reach, like between the feet or under the wings; and it must be done rapidly so that the skin isn't scorched.

The smell of charred feathers quickly fills the kitchen with a light, acrid and unpleasant smoke. I rush to the window and open it to clear the air. Once the chicken is singed, Mamie places it on the cutting board and then with the help of a hook, she pulls the stove's cast iron hotplate back into place and the flames vanish.

With the chicken resting on one side, Grandmother chops off the feet two centimeters below the joint. Now it is time to behead the chicken.

The throat is cut at its base, carefully leaving the skin attached to the bird's abdomen. Then with a very sharp knife that I'm not allowed to touch, Mamie opens the neck and pulls away the fatty skin so that she can remove the esophagus. She must do this before entirely disconnecting the neck from the bird's rib cage. The esophagus is then discarded.

"Were you watching, Eric?"

How could I not watch Mamie's every movement? She is a master with knives.

"Yes, Mamie."

"Can you see why we must clean the neck bone?"

"Um...because necks are icky?"

She laughs and tells me my answer is partially correct.

“We clean the neck so that it can be added to the broth for extra flavor.”

“But what about all that neck skin you cut off?”

“Ah. Wise child.”

Mamie reaches for the excess skin and begins to apply a portion across the opening where the neck was removed. Another piece of skin is draped like a cape over the bird’s back. Both actions added an extra layer of fat and a bit of protection. No one likes overcooked fowl.

Next, Mamie runs her finger around the base of the wishbone in the thoracic cage to release the membranes, the crop and the lungs; then she empties the innards of the bird. The giblets come out all at once, followed by two soft and yellowy masses that appear to be eggs without their shells. All is thrown out except for the gizzard, the liver and the heart.

It’s like a horror movie. Blood, gizzards, hearts — and I am fascinated by all these preparations!

“My mother,” says Mamie, “used to keep the hen’s eggs — yes, those yellowy things are eggs. She’d put them in the stuffing. But I prefer using freshly laid eggs.”

“I agree, Mamie.” I try to make my comment sound mature, but really all I am thinking is, *Yuck! How gross is that to use unformed eggs in your cooking!*

She smiles, probably reading my mind: fresh eggs look far more appetizing.

I’m thrilled that Mamie wants me to prepare the vegetables. She gives me her basket in which there are carrots, leeks, two stalks of celery, some turnips, two onions and a small green cabbage. She instructs me to wash and peel them while she prepares the stuffing.

In a French kitchen there are strict rules for washing food. The root vegetables, all those that grow underground, must be scrubbed in cold running water to remove excess soil. They are then dropped in a cold bath that includes a drop of bleach. This kills all bacteria and toxins that might otherwise cause botulism or other diseases. Nasty, nasty. This procedure was a must in the old days, and is still an important precaution in today’s world of organically grown food.

Leafy vegetables that grow above ground, such as lettuce, kale, and cabbage, are given their own bath in cold water with a drop of vinegar. This acidic mixture removes any insects that may be crawling within the layers of the leaves; they curl and drop to the bottom of the bath. Before discarding the filthy water, the clean food must be removed by hand and placed in a colander.

Lots of work for an eager boy like me!

“All nice and clean?” Mamie asks.

“Yes.”

“Excellent. Now we’ll use the vegetables to prepare a stock. When it’s done, we’ll keep it in the refrigerator overnight and then tomorrow use the stock to stew the chicken for our Sunday lunch.”

Per Mamie’s instructions, I place the veggies in a pot of cold water and then somehow successfully move the heavy burden to the stove.

When Grandmother begins cleaning up, I protest, “But we’re not done!”

“Yet we’ve had a full day, haven’t we?”

I agree. And maybe I’m just a little sleepy from all the exciting events.

Mamie explains that a delicious *poule au pot* can certainly be prepared in a day. But it can turn into an ordeal if you also go to market as we did, and then visit with friends and family.

“We’ll get up early tomorrow and finish our work. It’s easier for the chef and her assistant that way.”

I love my new title: assistant to the master chef.

A simple dinner, storybook time and then I fall into Mamie’s big bed and drop off to dreamland where I am chased in a House of Horrors by a headless chicken and fend off an army of giblets with a sword (actually, a very long carrot).

The next morning I wake up when I hear Mamie call. I dash to the kitchen.

In a big bowl, Mamie starts a *panada* by dipping stale bread leftovers into a glass bowl of milk with a hint of Cognac. She kneads everything so that the pieces of bread soak up every last drop of the liquid.

Then she places the bowl under a heavy mechanical meat grinder screwed to the edge of the kitchen table. First she adds and grinds the chicken liver, then the heart and a big veal scallop. To this, she adds a piece of regional raw ham (a portion of a cured ham prepared by Aunt Jeannette in Momas); a piece of *ventrêche* that has been salt cured and air dried, not smoked (also from Jeannette); and garlic, shallots and parsley.

I watch closely as Mamie adds salt, pepper, thyme and two eggs to the bowl and mixes everything for a few minutes more before stuffing the chicken. With a trussing needle, she sews the opening shut to prevent the stuffing from pouring out.

The chicken is immersed in the now warm stock where it will simmer on the stove at low heat for two hours.

“Have we forgotten anything?” Mamie asks.

I’m puzzled. What else could we possibly need?

“Remember the neck we cleaned yesterday?”

“For extra flavor!”

“Good boy!”

She adds the chicken neck to the pot, and from time to time skims the stock and tends to other kitchen tasks. This is when Mamie enjoys telling me more about King Henry IV, and repeating why he was called “the kind king.”

If Mamie did not live in the old neighborhood so close to Château de Pau, the king’s castle, perhaps her history lessons would be less frequent. Yet, as a family, we took great pride in being so close to such a significant historic site. And I’m sure the stories Mamie told helped me deepen my appreciation of France’s traditions and rituals.

Also, every tale was a subtle reminder that the virtues of kindness, good humor and compassion must never be forgotten, no matter how high your position in life. Henry was royalty, yes, but this did not diminish his love of people, and for that reason his reign had a long and lasting impact on France.

And his love of food had a lasting impact on my family, as expressed through Mamie’s generous meals and lessons.

As Mamie’s long history lesson ends, Mother and my brother and sister arrive for their Sunday meal.

Mamie sends me to the cellar to get a new bottle of wine, giving me precise instructions because Mamie’s bottles don’t have any labels. The bottle is a Madiran that the wine maker sends directly to her. I am too young to drink wine, but not to eat *poule au pot*.

Dad arrives. As I mentioned, he has a full-time job during the week with Ganchou, a construction company in Pau. But he has been working for a private client, building a house on weekends and sometimes evenings when the weather is mild. He does this to earn extra money to help cover the cost of private school. I believe this is part of the reason Mamie cooks for us so much. She likes to be surrounded by her grandchildren, but she also likes to see her son and know that he is well fed.

Dad is starving. No surprise. But he must settle for the aperitif that is served while Mamie strains some broth from the *poule au pot* into a separate pan to which she adds fine angel hair pasta. The broth with pasta is our appetizer and it is delicious. Its golden, luxurious texture

exudes a strong aroma, and the fatty beads that appear on the surface render the dish supple and sophisticated.

I explain the importance of including the neck in the stock preparation. But Jean-Marc smirks and says shut up and eat.

The appetizer has been consumed and our bellies are warm. Now we are ready for the coronation.

The *poule au pot* Mamie and I prepared is not something the French enjoy every day or even every month. It is on par with a visit from royalty. In other words, it is a time to rejoice.

We are silent when Grandmother arrives from the kitchen carrying the bird on a platter. As she sets down the meal, we gush, gawk and applaud as the intoxicating steam from the beautiful food rises like a sacrament and then floats down under our noses. We inhale and are overcome with desire: the aromas fill our senses, much like great music or a Renaissance painting endows us with the magnificence of life.

I am dizzy as I look upon the gleaming, plump breast and the exquisite vegetables, all so full of color, because I am seeing it with new eyes: I helped prepare this gastronomic delight and this simple fact excites me almost as much as the thought of consuming it.

The communal climax of our family soiree happens when Dad carves the chicken and serves each of us a generous piece with a slice of stuffing, some vegetables and the heaven-sent broth.

The meal is divine.

The delicate, lightly aromatic flesh of the bird melts in my mouth. The richly fragrant *panada* emits ample and sumptuous perfumes that make my taste buds tingle in a frenzy of anticipation. First, I notice the supple texture of the soft part of the bread, engorged with the juice of the poultry liver; and once I chew and swallow a mouthful, it leaves a warm aftertaste with a hint of Cognac that brings a flush to my cheeks — a sensation I relish and will long remember. The vegetables deliver various essences and mouth-watering satisfaction without overpowering the flavor of the meat.

What a weekend for me! Unforgettable. Far from my family's low-cost housing, I have enjoyed so many experiences: Spending the night at Mamie's home so that I could shop with her the next day in Les Halles, where we sampled delicacies and met many interesting people. And beforehand, the tour of Pau when Grandmother collected horse bets. She didn't win at the races, but my kind, generous Mamie was a big hit with the many people she helped along the way.

Also a two-day cooking class that resulted in a masterful (and memorable) family Sunday meal.

It is with full stomachs and in a festive mood that my family returns home. In my room, lying on my bed, I replay and reflect on the images and highlights of the weekend, taking stock of it all.

I love to cook with Mamie, but the school year is coming to an end, and that means our family discussions have turned to summer vacation. We are probably going to go to the beach at Port-Vendres, like every year. I'm not complaining: Jean-Marc and I have a fun time by the sea.

Yet it saddens me a bit when I consider that the vacation will keep me so far from Mamie's kitchen. I realize this weekend has changed me, and deepened my resolve to learn everything I possibly can about food and my quest to become a professional chef.

My heart leaps when a fresh, new idea tickles my brain: I will learn special coastal recipes and bring them back for more kitchen experiences with Grandmother.

I will also collect amazing seashells as a gift for my dear Mamie. And when I return, together we will put them to our ears and listen to the ocean and maybe glean secrets about what lies ahead for the master chef and her assistant.