

Created by: Debra C. Argen

Jacques Pepin - An Interview with the Master Chef



If one tried to summarize the essence of Jacques Pepin in just one word, it would not be possible!



Chef (Master Chef), Educator (Dean of Special Programs at The French Culinary Institute in New York, and adjunct faculty member at Boston University), Author (numerous cookbooks, including collaborating with his friend, Julia Child, as well as with his daughter, Claudine), Actor (his own television cooking show), Academic (MA in 18th Century French Literature from Columbia University in New York), Columnist (formerly for The New York Times and presently for Food & Wine Magazine), Husband (wife, Gloria), Father (daughter, Claudine), and Artist (he paints in his free time), all accurately describe this most articulate, charming and versatile man.

He has cooked at some of the most prestigious hotels in the world including Le Grand Hôtel L'Europe, Le Meurice and Plaza Athénée in Paris, at New York's acclaimed Le Pavillon restaurant, has been the personal chef for some of the most influential world leaders, (Charles de Gaulle and 2 other French Heads-of-State), has received 2 of the French Government's highest honors – Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et Lettres (1997) and Chevalier de L'Ordre du Mérite Agricole (1992), and on May 2, 2005, Jacques Pepin received another great honor, he was awarded the 2005 Lifetime Achievement Award from [The James Beard Foundation](#).



I had the great pleasure of meeting Mr. Pepin on April 6, 2005 at the James Beard House where they announced the nominees for the 2005 James Beard Foundation Awards over a Press Breakfast cooked by students from The French Culinary Institute. As the students prepared a breakfast of classic pastries,

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baguettes, and Puff Pastry Cases filled with Truffled Scrambled Eggs, Mr. Pepin observed them with the dedication and look of a proud father. When the James Beard Foundation Awarded Mr. Pepin with their 2005 Lifetime Achievement Award at the Breakfast, he responded "I am delighted to be here, but I am not a morning person"; to which he quoted Oscar Wilde, "Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast", but I will try."

When I scheduled an interview with Mr. Pepin, I made it for late morning, so that we both might be brilliant, as I too, am not a morning person.

Luxury Experience Magazine: Every year there are trends in cooking. What current trend do you like?

Mr. Pepin: People are getting away from fusion and fashion, and going back to their roots.

LEM: What current trend do you feel is overdone?

JP: Trends are always changing, a new idea comes about for example, diets, and the craze of carbohydrates, craze of proteins, it starts to get confusing and most people end up going back to eating what they want.

LEM: What attributes do you feel are the most important to be a good chef?

JP: You have to love it, is the most important attribute. Chefs work long hours, 16 hours a day, holidays, weekends, and most chefs do not make a lot of money. You must love it, as well as have talent, discipline and fortitude. It can be very rewarding, because you bring pleasure to people.

LEM: What piece of advice would you give to future chefs?

JP: Go into the business because you love it. In the past, Chefs were at the bottom of the social scale, now we are considered geniuses. Don't go into it to become famous, get a television show, etc., do it because you love it, because if those things do not happen, you will still be fulfilled and satisfied.

LEM: What chef or chefs have influenced you the most?

JP: First my mother, because I left home at 13 years old, and my mother was a chef. Later, the chef at the Plaza Athénée in Paris, and his brother, Louis Diat, who was the chef at the Ritz. When I came to America, Craig Claiborne and his new way of looking at food influenced me, it was a new freedom.

LEM: If you could only use 3 ingredients to create a recipe, what would they be?

JP: Eggs, butter and bread.

LEM: Although you are a Master Chef, if you had to choose between being a pastry chef or a savory chef, which would you choose and why?

JP: Savory Chef, because a pastry chef is more mathematical, everything must be in the right calculations, because once you put it in the oven, that is it. A savory chef can be more creative and has more leeway.

LEM: Everyone has a memory of a special meal. Sometimes it is because of the food, and sometimes it is because of the setting or the company. Describe one of your most memorable meals and why it was memorable.

JP: I have a lot of those, with the food partially, as food is important, but context is more important. As a child, I remember meals with my father and mother, and later with my brother, my wife and daughter. One especially memorable meal was one with lobster rolls.

LEM: In addition to your many achievements, you are also an artist.

JP: Somewhat!

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LEM: When did you start painting? Have you always painted?

JP: No, not in France. When I came to the US, I went to Columbia University, and took courses in painting and sculpture. I rented a house with friends in Woodstock in the Catskills, (1961-1963), and we all painted. I especially love cement. The first house that I ever owned, I mostly renovated myself. In our present house we have many bathrooms, Gloria has her own bathroom, I have my own bathroom, etc. and I did the marble and granite work myself. In my kitchen, I have mosaics, I did the cement work and I even painted the tiles.

LEM: What medium do you use in your painting: oil, acrylic, watercolors?

JP: In the past I used oil, but now I use acrylic. It doesn't smell, which my wife likes, and it cleans easier off your fingers.

LEM: What artists or styles influence your art?

JP: I go to a museum and come out exhilarated. Picasso is an extraordinary painter. I also like the Impressionist school, and some of the abstracts, although my own work is flowers and landscapes.

LEM: Are your paintings for sale? Does a gallery represent you? Have you ever had an exhibition?

JP: No, my paintings are not for sale. I have had a couple of exhibits, but I think the people came mostly for the buffets, because they were friends. I give away many of my paintings to friends. I don't think a gallery will be representing me in the future.

LEM: You are a Master Chef, Author, Columnist, Television Star Chef, Educator, Artist, Academic, Husband and Father.

JP: I am also a grandfather of a 1-year granddaughter!

LEM: Is there anything that you haven't already done that you would like to accomplish?

JP: Just more of the same. I have a charmed life. Now that it is spring, I look forward to the mushroom season, to roam the woods with my dog in search of mushrooms.

Mr. Pepin truly is an astonishing man, who not only lives a charmed life he is also quite charming. His enthusiasm for new pursuits continues with his television show, which he films for PBS in San Francisco and his latest cookbook, *Jacques Pepin Fast Food My Way*.

Congratulations Mr. Pepin on winning the James Beard Foundation 2005 Lifetime Achievement Award. You truly are an inspiration.

For more information on Mr. Jacques Pepin, please visit his website at: [Jacques Pepin](#). For information on the James Beard Foundation, please visit: [James Beard Foundation](#).

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