

# Sacré Cordon Bleu!

The cooking-school exam that ate Julia Child.



**B**y late 1950, I felt ready to take my final examination and earn my *diplôme* from the Cordon Bleu in Paris. But when I asked Mme. Brassart, the school's director, to schedule the test — politely, at first, then with an increasing insistence — my requests were met with stony silence. The truth is that Mme. Brassart and I got on each other's nerves. She seemed to think that awarding a student a diploma was like inducting them into some kind of secret society; as a result, the school's hallways were filled with an air of petty jealousy and distrust. From my perspective, Mme. Brassart lacked professional experience, was a terrible administrator and tangled herself up in picayune

details and politics. Because of its exalted reputation, the Cordon Bleu's pupils came from all over the globe. But the lack of a qualified and competent head was hurting the school — and could damage the reputation of French cooking, or even France herself, in the eyes of the world.

I was sure that the little question of money had something to do with Mme. Brassart's evasiveness. I had taken the “professional” course in the basement rather than the “regular” (more expensive) course upstairs, which she had recommended; I never ate at the school; and she didn't make as much money out of me as she would have liked. It seemed to me that the school's director should have paid less attention to *centimes* and more attention to her students, who, after all, were — or could be — her best publicity.

After waiting and waiting for my exam to be scheduled, I sent Mme. Brassart a stern letter in March 1951, noting that “all my American friends and even the U.S. ambassador himself” knew I had been slaving away at the Cordon Bleu, “morning, noon and night.” I insisted that I take the exam before I left on a long-planned trip to the United States in April. If there was not enough space at the school, I added, then I would be happy to take the exam in my own well-appointed kitchen.

More time passed, and still no response. I was good and fed up and finally spoke to Chef Bugnard, my professor, about the matter. He agreed to make inquiries on my behalf. Lo and behold, Mme. Brassart suddenly scheduled my exam for the first week in April. Ha! I continued to hone my technique, memorize

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*Julia Child was an author of “Mastering the Art of French Cooking” and the host of “The French Chef.” She died in 2004. Alex Prud'homme, Child's nephew, is the author of “The Cell Game.” This article is an excerpt from “My Life in France,” by Julia Child with Alex Prud'homme, to be published in April.*

Photograph by Paul Child



proportions and prepare myself in every way I could think of.

On the big day, I arrived at the school, and they handed me a little typewritten card that said, "Write out the ingredients for the following dishes, to serve three people: oeufs mollets; côtelettes de veau en surprise; crème renversée au caramel."

I stared at the card in disbelief.

Did I remember what an oeuf mollet was? No. How could I miss that? (I later discovered that it was eggs that have been coddled and then peeled.) How about the veau "en surprise"? No. (A sautéed veal chop with duxelles, or hashed mushrooms, on either side, overlaid with ham slices and all wrapped up in a paper bag — the "surprise" — that is then browned in the oven.) Did I remember the exact proportions for caramel custard? No.

*Zut alors, and flûte!*

I was stuck, and had no choice but to make everything up. I knew I would fail the practical part of the exam. As for the written exam, I was asked how to make fond brun, how to cook green vegetables and how to make sauce béarnaise. I answered them fully and correctly. But that didn't take away the sting.

I was furious at myself. There was no excuse for not remembering what a *mollet* was or, especially, the details of a caramel custard. I could never have guessed at the veau en surprise, though, as the paper wrapping was just a lot of tomfoolery — the kind of gimmicky dish a little newlywed would serve up for her first dinner party to *épater* the boss's wife. Caught up in my own romanticism, I had focused on learning far more challenging fare — filets de sole à la Walewska, poularde Toulousaine, sauce Vénétienne. Woe!

There were no questions about complicated dishes or sauces, no discussion about which techniques and methods I'd use. Instead, they wanted me to memorize basic recipes taken from the little Cordon Bleu booklet, a publication written for beginner cooks that I had hardly bothered to look at. This exam was far too simple for someone who had devoted six months of hard work to cooking school, not to mention countless hours of her own time in the markets and behind the stove.

My disgruntlement was supreme, my *amour-propre* enraged, my bile overboiling. Worst of all, it was my own fault.

I despaired that the school would ever deign to grant me a certificate. Me, who could pluck, flame, empty and cut up a whole chicken in 12 minutes flat! Me, who could stuff a sole with forcemeat of weakfish and serve it with a sauce au vin blanc such as Mme. Brassart could never hope to taste the perfection of! Me, the supreme mistress of mayonnaise, hollandaise, cassoulets, choucroutes, blanquettes de veau, pommes de terre Anna, soufflé Grand Marnier, fonds d'artichauts, onions glacées, mousse de faisane en gelée, balantines, galantines, terrines, pâtés, laitues braisées ... me, alas!

Later that afternoon, I slipped down to the Cordon Bleu's basement kitchen by myself. I opened the school's booklet, found the recipes from the examination — oeufs mollets with sauce béarnaise, côtelettes de veau en surprise and crème renversée au caramel — and whipped them all up in a cold, clean fury. Then I ate them.

### Côtelettes de Veau en Surprise (Veal Chops Surprise)

11 tablespoons unsalted butter	6 veal chops, trimmed, 6 ounces each
2 large shallots, finely chopped	2 tablespoons vegetable oil
10 ounces mushrooms, trimmed, rinsed, dried and finely diced	12 thin slices cooked ham
Salt and freshly ground black pepper	1 egg white, beaten.

1. Heat 3 tablespoons of the butter in a large skillet over low heat. Add the shallots and sauté until softened. Increase the heat to high and add the mushrooms. Season with salt and pepper. Sauté until all the moisture has evaporated, then spread the mixture on a plate to cool.
2. Heat the oven to 400 degrees. Season both sides of the chops with salt and pepper. Heat the oil and 1 tablespoon of the butter in a large skillet over high heat. Add the chops and brown lightly on both sides. Transfer to paper towels to drain, and pat dry.
3. Cut six 12-by-10-inch rectangles of parchment paper. Melt the remaining 7 tablespoons butter. Position a rectangle of parchment so that the 10-inch side is directly in front of you. Brush with butter, and place a tablespoon of the mushroom mixture in the middle of the lower half of the rectangle. Top with a slice of ham, topped with a veal chop. Cover the veal with another slice of ham and another tablespoon of mushrooms. Repeat with the remaining pieces of parchment paper, veal chops, mushrooms and ham.
4. Brush a ¼-inch border of egg white along the 3 edges of the lower half of the rectangles. Fold the upper half of the rectangle over the veal, and align the edges. Again brush the 3 edges with egg white, then fold and crimp the edges to make a strong seal. Continue until all six chops are encased in parchment. Brush the surface of the parchment with the remaining melted butter, and brush the crimped edges again with egg white. Lay the veal packets on a baking sheet and bake until the packets are puffed and brown, about 15 minutes. Transfer each packet to a plate to be opened at the table. *Serves 6. Adapted from Le Cordon Bleu.*



### Crème Renversée au Caramel (Caramel Custard)

½ cup plus ⅔ cup sugar	2 large eggs
2 cups milk	4 large egg yolks.
1½ teaspoons vanilla extract	

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. In a small saucepan, combine ½ cup sugar with ¼ cup water. Bring to a boil over low heat, stirring to dissolve the sugar. Increase the heat to high and cook, without stirring, until the syrup turns a light caramel color. Remove the saucepan from the heat and dip the bottom into cold water to stop the cooking. Pour the caramel into a 4-cup charlotte mold, and tilt so that it covers the bottoms and sides. Let cool.
2. In a small saucepan, bring the milk and vanilla to a boil. In a heatproof bowl, beat the eggs, egg yolks and ⅔ cup sugar until blended. Whisking constantly, pour the hot milk into the egg mixture; let rest for a few minutes, then strain. Pour the custard into the caramel-coated mold.
3. Put the mold in a small but deep baking or roasting pan, and add hot water to come about two-thirds up the sides of the mold. Place the pan on the stove over medium heat, and bring the water to a simmer. Transfer the pan to the oven. (The water should stay at a low simmer at all times; do not let it boil or the custard will overcook.) Bake until a knife inserted into the center of the custard comes out clean, 40 to 50 minutes. Keep the custard in the baking pan until the water cools. Remove from the pan to finish cooling. To serve, run the tip of a knife around the top of the custard to loosen it. Invert a serving platter over the mold and quickly turn it over again. Carefully remove the mold. *Serves 6. Adapted from Le Cordon Bleu.* ■