

Cooking up a social change

RUTH SIRKIS

A personal case study

In this article, I would like to illustrate how one person can “cook up” a social change and make a difference in social behaviors. This is a case study that I have not only followed, but also, in a way, helped to create. This paper tells of three women, in different parts of the world, who made a difference in the culinary orientation of their countries. These culinary changes reached far beyond the kitchen. They influenced the book industry, the food industry and the choices of foods in supermarkets and homes. The changes reached the restaurant scene and the perception of international cuisine. They ignited interest in other people’s foods and motivated appreciation of new cuisines and the actual cooking of new dishes. Each change was started by one woman, as an expression of her personal interests and needs. There was no public support—just an inner drive to do what looked and felt right.

Ruth Sirkis: From the center of Tel Aviv to French cuisine in Boston

My own story starts in Tel Aviv. As a person born and educated in the center of Tel Aviv, my notion about food in general, and Jewish food in particular, was of the foods that my mother cooked. It was similar to the foods cooked by the mothers of all my friends from school and the youth movement. It was Ashkenazi foods from Europe.

When new immigrants came, in the early 1950s, from Middle Eastern countries, they were sent to remote towns and villages. We, in Tel Aviv, had no idea about their foods. The only non-Ashkenazi foods we sampled were falafel and humus, and they were considered very exotic. The more common food served in the main streets of Tel Aviv was European home food. It was served in cafeteria-style “workers restaurants,” in small “Tnuva branches,” and on special occasions in dining and dancing establishments. For afternoon coffee and tea, there were coffeehouses and conдитories specializing in wonderful European pastries. Some of these coffeehouses even had small orchestras and singers, in the best Viennese and Hungarian style.

In the early 1960s, I was a student of social work at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. We studied about the Wadi Salib (Haifa) demonstrations and riots by the Middle Eastern immigrants, who felt discriminated against and were economically distressed. I remember feeling sympathy and compassion for this unfortunate group.

After I completed my studies as a social worker and got my B.S.W. from The Hebrew University, I went to Boston, in 1962, with my husband Rafael. He studied there to get his Masters degree in electronics. In Boston I gave birth to my two baby daughters: Tammy in 1963 and Nurit in 1964. I stayed home with the girls and developed my cooking hobby. I watched Julia Child teach French cooking on Boston public television and I was keen to know more about French cuisine. Needless to say, I admired Julia Child, and the first French chocolate mousse I prepared was fantastic...

Julia Child: The ambassador of French cuisine to the US

Julia McWilliams was born in Pasadena, California, into a wealthy family. She graduated from Smith College in Massachusetts and moved to New York to work in public relations and advertising. In 1941, when the US joined World War II, Julia started to work for a government intelligence agency. She was sent on assignments to the Far East and, while serving in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon, part of the British Empire), she met Paul Child and married him in 1946 in the US.

In 1948, Paul Child was assigned to a position at the American Embassy in Paris and the couple moved to France. Paul, who appreciated good food and wine, introduced his wife to fine French cuisine. Julia Child wrote about her first gourmet meal in France as a culinary revelation. She described the meal of fish *a la meuniere* (fish sautéed in butter with lemon), served with good wine, as initiating a big change in her life and the start of a new career.

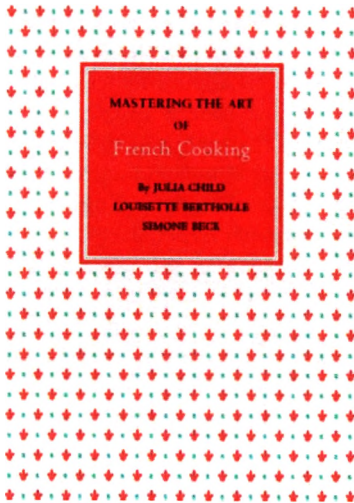
As she developed her interest in French haut cuisine, she attended the world-famous Cordon Bleu cooking school and studied privately with some master chefs. She joined a women's cooking club, as an instructor, and started to work on a cookbook with her two cooking club partners, Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle.

Her vision was to introduce sophisticated French cuisine to regular Americans. Therefore her classic book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* was written in such a way as to appeal to the average (unsophisticated) American home cook. It took her and her colleagues ten years to write this phenomenal book. Starting in 1951, Julia and her two friends collected, tested and wrote hundreds of French recipes. Julia was responsible for translating the recipes into English. She insisted on making the recipes detailed, clear and practical for the American household.

When Julia and Paul Child returned to the US, the book was finally published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1961. The 734-page book was an immediate bestseller and stayed on the lists for about five years. In 1963 Julia started her TV show, "The

French Chef,” on Boston’s public TV station, WGBH. Her first show aired on February 11, 1963.

Figure 1



Mastering the Art of French Cooking
By Julia Child, Louisette Bertholle, Simone Beck
Published in the USA by Alfred A. Knopf

The interest that Julia Child’s book and TV show generated in the US was unprecedented. In the 1960s, everything French was highly popular. Many French restaurants opened, French chefs came over and French foods were imported to the US. The change of the culinary scene was very noticeable. And it was started by the passion of one person to teach a whole nation to appreciate the good things of life, those things that she herself had learned to love and enjoy.

Julia Child was a very beloved figure. She received many prizes and awards, and her kitchen is now on display in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. But the biggest tribute to her was the film *Julie and Julia*, released in 2009, which told her story of falling in love with French food and the process of introducing it to the American public. Her vision was to teach the complicated procedures of French cuisine in a simple and practical way. She succeeded, singlehandedly creating a tremendous change.

Ruth Sirkis: Starting a new career

I left Boston in 1965 and returned to Israel with my husband and two daughters. I started to cook at home for my Israeli friends and shared with them my new knowledge and enthusiasm for fine food. Eventually, I started to write about food in *At*, a new Israeli women's magazine published by the Ma'ariv Group. The scope of my writing grew considerably when my husband Rafael was appointed Consul of Israel for Economic Affairs in Los Angeles in 1968. For the next four years, I wrote for my magazine readers the very first articles in Hebrew about Mexican, Hawaiian, Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Indian foods. During that time, I also had a weekly syndicated recipe column, distributed by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in the local Jewish newspapers of the U.S. coast to coast, in the United Kingdom, in South Africa and in Australia. In 1972, I wrote my first two cookbooks in English, *A Taste of Tradition* (Ward Ritchie Press) and *Popular Food from Israel* (BUN Publishing). In 1975, I published my first book in Hebrew, *From the Kitchen with Love*. It became an all-time Israeli bestseller.

I felt very close to my idol, Julia Child. There were several similarities in our careers. Both of us started our interest in food after being away from home and being introduced to new cuisines—she to French cuisine and I to American and international cuisines. Both of us were married to diplomats, and both of us wrote bestselling cookbooks.

I learned a lot from her, and not just about cooking. My book was very well researched, the recipes very detailed and accurate. My vision was to simplify and write international recipes in such a way that anyone who could read would be able to cook them successfully.

Many years later, I met Julia Child at her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I contacted her and told her about my work and thanked her for inspiring me. She invited me and my husband Rafael to visit her and cooked lunch for us. We had the lunch in her kitchen with her husband, Paul. Rafael and Paul, both being ex-diplomats, had much to discuss.

Figure 2



From the Kitchen With Love
By Ruth Sirkis

In the late 1970s, after the great success of my book in Israel, I opened a publishing company specializing in cookbooks. The company, Bayit Va'Gan, was a partnership between myself and Zmora, Bitan Modan. As chief editor, I was responsible for finding good cookbooks in Israel and abroad. It was at that time that I met Claudia Roden. Claudia has family in Israel, and very much wanted her first book about Middle Eastern food to be translated to Hebrew.

I decided to take on Claudia's book and felt that by publishing a cookbook on Middle Eastern food, I was doing something right for Israel. I still remembered the Wadi Salib demonstrations and thought that a book about their food would be good for their self-esteem. Until then, there had been no respectable in-depth cookbook on Sephardic-Mediterranean food. So I started to work with Claudia Roden.

Claudia Roden: The voice of Middle Eastern food

I was serving in the Israeli army in 1956 when the "Kadesh" campaign took place. Claudia Roden's Jewish family, who lived in Alexandria, had to leave Egypt because of that war. They moved to London, and this was the starting point of Claudia's magnificent career.

Claudia Douek was born in Cairo, Egypt. The roots of her family were in Aleppo, Syria, from where her father's family came to Egypt. Her father was a merchant and she had a comfortable childhood in a wealthy Jewish home. As a young adult, she was sent to study in France and then moved to England to attend an art school in London.

Claudia's father, Cesar Elie Douek, was a *bon vivant* who loved life and the pleasures of life. He appreciated Middle Eastern cuisine, but when the family moved to England, his beloved foods were not available to him any longer. At that time the selection of Middle Eastern ingredients—spices, herbs, olive oil, cheese, sweets and the like—was very limited in London. Besides, it was difficult to recreate the favorite dishes, because in Egypt they had been prepared by cooks and servants. This problem was the driving force that prompted Claudia to act. She started to look for recipes that would enable her to recreate the family's culinary favorites in England.

It turned out that this problem was not restricted to the Douek family, but touched many more. In the introduction to her first book, Claudia wrote that the cookbook was a communal work created by people like herself that had been displaced. People that were living in the Diaspora, far from their original Middle Eastern homes, by choice or necessity. Those people badly missed their culinary heritage, the foods that they used to eat and still loved very much. It was a nostalgic craving for the food of one's childhood, food that was a constant pleasure in the Middle East and so different from the European and American foods around them.

Claudia Roden started her endeavor of collecting Middle Eastern recipes in the 1960s. In her book, she tells of living in Paris and being invited every Sunday to her relatives to eat *ful me'dammes*. This national Egyptian dish is comprised of slowly cooked fava beans served with olive oil, lemon juice and a hard-boiled egg. She describes how her hosts, who lived in a small apartment and worked during the week, were unable to cook the dish in the proper way, and yet they served the *ful me'dammes* as a weekly ritual. They used canned cooked fava beans, drizzled with olive oil, sprinkled with tangy lemon juice and put a hot hard-boiled egg in the center. The hosts and guests were intoxicated by the pleasure! They ate silently, mashing the eggs into the *ful* with their forks, and felt the happiness of the simple food that brought back dear memories.

So Claudia began to collect the recipes that represented the rich heritage of her friends and relatives, who were dispersed all over the world. An intensive recipe exchange started, mostly by mail, and hundreds were collected, mainly from Sephardic Jews with roots in Middle Eastern countries, such as Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, North Africa and the Balkans. Claudia witnessed the exchange of recipes between her mother and aunts, an exchange that crossed oceans and brought a lot of happiness to those who could, with the help of those recipes, recreate their lovely dishes, full of memories of rich family occasions.

Claudia and her mother started to cook at home, in London, their traditional dishes according to the recipes they got in the mail. All the good tastes and smells

reminded them of their home in Alexandria, with the colorful Musky Market, the Kornish (Promenade) and famous Alexandrian restaurants. Those foods also brought memories of old proverbs that they used to tell at the dinner table and related folk stories. The traditional foods also reminded them of their way of life and even of poems and some anecdotes, like the story about sitting on the second-floor balcony and sending down a basket with some money and a shopping list to the grocery store, and then pulling it up with the requested foods inside.

The next step came naturally. Claudia started to write down the recipes, together with the personal stories, the folk tales, the proverbs and many more cultural aspects of the Middle Eastern food—the food that was a major part of the old way of life and that was interwoven in its social structure and culture.

While Claudia collected and tested the recipes, she became interested in the languages, the religions, the influences, the differences and the similarities between them. This wonderful recipe collection became a cookbook simply named *A Book of Middle Eastern Food*. It was published by Penguin Books in 1968 in paperback.

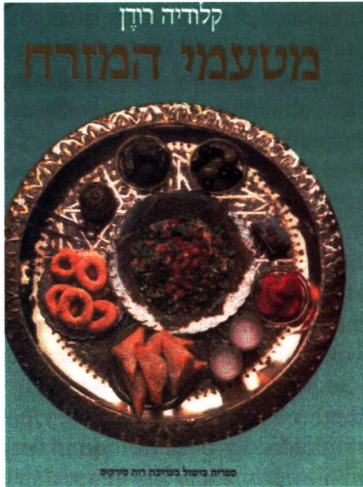
Even though the book began as a tribute to the foods of the “old country,” it became very successful with the general British public. Middle Eastern food is very tasty and colorful, and the people of Britain were enthusiastic about the new cuisine that was presented to them. It was like a refreshing breeze that revitalized the dull and heavy British cuisine. The book presented the health benefits of the Middle Eastern way of life and strengthened the appeal of the “Mediterranean diet.” The result was a new wave of Middle Eastern restaurants and stores, and Claudia Roden became a household name in Britain and many other countries.

Since then, Claudia Roden has published several more cookbooks in England and the US. Her publisher there is Alfred A. Knopf and her editor is Judith Johns, the same editor who worked with Julia Child. Claudia has also been a food writer in prestigious magazines and a cooking show presenter on BBC.

Ruth Sirkis: Introducing Claudia Roden to the Israeli public

In the late 1970s, when I decided to publish *The Book of Middle Eastern Food* in Hebrew, I also decided to change its format. Instead of a humble paperback, I published it as a big, colorful book. I commissioned food photography to be done in London. Claudia and her mother cooked the dishes at home and brought all their original props to enhance the settings. The photographer was Robert Golden, a renowned English photographer of the time.

Figure 3



Middle Eastern Food By Claudia Roden

Translated into Hebrew and Published in Israel by R. Sirkis Publishers Ltd.

The Hebrew book that I published made Claudia Roden famous in Israel and she inspired many Israeli chefs, restaurants and households to start cooking Middle Eastern foods. I published two more of her books: *Mediterranean Foods* and *Outdoor Cooking*, which were also successful.

In the process of publishing Claudia's books, we became friends. She visited our home in Tel Aviv several times, and we visited her in Golders Green, London. We enjoyed the wonderful foods that she served us and the interesting conversations with her.

Conclusion

The three women described above are different from one another. They are from different continents: Julia Child from America, Claudia Roden from Africa and Ruth Sirkis from Asia. They are from different professions and occupations: advertising, art and social work. They are from very different cultural and food environments: American food, Middle Eastern food and Jewish Ashkenazi food.

And yet, they probably have a lot in common. Even though they did not know each other in the beginning of their work, they operated in a similar way. All three women had a strong will and drive to record the foods of their interest, and to write clearly about them. They all worked for many years—seven, eight to ten years—on

their first book. And they all had the courage to be the first to deal with new materials, unknown or uncommon in their environment.

But what is more striking is that each of these women left her home and her country and lived abroad for many years. Julia Child came from the US to Paris; Claudia Roden fled from Egypt to London; and Ruth Sirkis went from Israel to Boston and then to Los Angeles. The encounter with another country, another culture, another language and new foods made an inner impression that influenced the creativity and ability to produce something new.

All three women functioned as mediators between two cultures. This made them “social agents” that absorb the values of one place and transform them to another. They all decided that recording the food culture, old and new, was the right thing to do. And this is how three very influential cookbooks came to be.