

First Opinion: Bon Appétit, Readers!

Reich, Susanna. *Minette's Feast: The Delicious Story of Julia Child and Her Cat*. Illus. Amy Bates. New York: Abrams, 2012.

Chris Woodworth



In the mid-twentieth century Julia Child found herself living in France with her husband, Paul. She was an outsider looking for a place to call home, a transplant living in another culture. A well-educated American, Julia had been raised in a wealthy family and had traveled the world and enjoyed life's many pleasures. Each evening, she and Paul would stroll the streets of Paris, enjoying the delectable French cuisine in open cafes, bistros, and restaurants. At that time, Julia and Paul resided on the top two floors of an old, dilapidated grey house that was cold and filled with mice living in the walls. Her kitchen was minimalist with few of the modern conveniences that we have come to expect today, not even a refrigerator. She had little prior cooking experience, but had decided to learn by endlessly experimenting in that humble setting with many newly-purchased knives and fresh produce obtained daily in the local market place. I found her ability to overcome these physical obstacles, along with her lack of culinary knowledge, inspiring. Her determination enabled her to master the art of French cooking.

Minette's Feast quickly draws its reader into Julia Child's world of culinary delight. Reich continuously shows Child feverishly working in her kitchen because she had never taken anything so seriously as learning how to cook. She learned to bake, blanch, blend, and boil along with washing, whipping, and whisking. Julia's expertise continued to grow as she learned to cook by doing and seeking assistance from others at the market, by reading recipes in authoritative cookbooks, or by attending classes at the famous Le Cordon Bleu cooking school. The reader can't help but identify with Julia Child and experience a kind of real-life relationship with her that enhances an appreciation for cooking. It took her 40 years, but Julia found her creative passion!

The story of Julia's cooking adventures in France is told from the perspective of a stray cat named Minette who was adopted by the Childs. The French believed, "A house without a cat is like life without sunshine" (unpaged). Minette was observant, mischievous, and energetic, with a superior nose, and she was a cat who loved to eat mice. Minette was not impressed initially with the food served by Julia, preferring to continue eating mice; however, as Julia's culinary skills progressed, her cat purred with contentment over the heavenly smells from the tasty food. By the end, the family, including the cat, feasted on a specially prepared meal that included meat prepared for three days and devoured it to the bone. Julia had perfected her skills!

The story introduces students to the French culture. Through the beautifully depicted street scenes painted in warm, earthy hues, the French signage, and the lifestyle images, the reader is immersed visually in that country's appeal. French food specialties such as croissants, baguettes, cheese soufflés, hollandaise sauce, and duck pâtés are mentioned to tantalize taste buds. The French language is communicated in the context of food and is of particular importance in reference to food preparation or pleasing results such as *la crémière*, *le boucher*, *magnifique*, or *Ooh-la-la*. These insights enhance the reader's appreciation for diversity and demonstrate how and what we as Americans have borrowed from this European nation.

Minette's Feast is truly a delicious story of Julia Child and her cat. The cooking vocabulary is extensive and organized, using the literary element of alliteration to add to the richness and appeal of this picture book. The book also includes an afterword with a biographical sketch of Child's life with an accompanying photograph. Within her notes, Susanna Reich explains that the dialogue in this book was not invented but can be found in *My Life in France* written by Julia Child with Alex Prud'homme and also in Julia and Paul's letters.

About the Author

Chris Woodworth, Ed.D., is the author of *Linking the Literature Series* (K–6). She currently is supervising student teachers for Stephen F. Austin State University, and teaching master's level classes, including Children's Literature for Concordia University Texas. She is president of Mainstay Math, LLC, and serves as a school volunteer for Kids Hope USA.