

Alma Lach's Kitchen: Transforming Taste

The art of cooking rests upon one's ability to taste, to reproduce taste, and to create taste. To achieve distinction the cook must taste everything, study cookbooks of all kinds, and experiment constantly in the kitchen. I stress in my writing and teaching the logic of food preparation; for the cook who possesses logic, knows how to create dishes rather than being content merely to duplicate the recipes of others.

—Alma Lach

Introduction

In the pioneering culinary era of the mid-twentieth century, Chicago chef Alma Lach was one of the primary figures who transformed traditional American cooking. She did so by introducing the history and principles of French cooking, thus opening midcentury American kitchens to new techniques and ingredients. As a chef, cookbook author, and food consultant, Alma was widely known for her bestselling book, *Cooking à la Cordon Bleu* (1970), later revised, with added material on regional French cuisine, and published by the University of Chicago Press as *Hows and Whys of French Cooking* (1974).

Alma was a graduate of Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris (Grand Diplôme, 1956). She spent a lifetime exploring taste around the globe. With her husband Donald Lach, the Bernadotte E. Schmitt Professor of History at the University of Chicago, she traveled throughout the world, including Italy, India, France, and China. Her daughter, Sandy Lach Arlinghaus, describes her mother as “doing scholarly research involving great cuisine.” Her education at Le Cordon Bleu helped her see cooking as having a “logical order rather than as an assemblage of a recipe here and

there.” Alma thought constantly about food; to her, presentation was an integral part of creating and enjoying great cuisine.

Alma was a member of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin and Les Dames d’Escoffier. She authored cookbooks for children, co-hosted a cooking show on public television, served as food editor for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, launched her own cooking school, and developed menus for travel and corporate clients. Alma was even a food consultant for some of Chicago’s favorite local restaurants, The Pump Room and The Berghoff. In addition, Alma invented an ingenious kitchen tool, the Curly Dog Cutting Board. There was nothing she could not do.

Visitors to the exhibition will enjoy material from the Alma Lach Papers, as well as from her extensive cookbook collection. Alma collected more than 3,000 cookbooks reflecting her broad range of interests in food preparation and dining, from classic French and Chinese cuisine, to cookbooks popularizing the foods of American ethnic groups, and recipe books produced by churches and volunteer groups.

Enjoy yourselves as you enter Alma’s culinary world!

The exhibition *Alma Lach’s Kitchen: Transforming Taste* was curated by Eileen Ielmini, Brittan Nannenga, and Catherine Uecker along with exhibition designer, Joseph Scott. In addition to selections from the Alma S. Lach Papers and the Alma Lach Culinary Library, the exhibition also includes a few selections from the University of Chicago Press Records.

The Special Collections Research Center is indebted to Sandra Lach Arlinghaus and William C. Arlinghaus for donating Alma’s papers and cookbook collection to the Library. We are also grateful to Sandy for all her support and guidance as we developed the exhibition. Her memories of her mother were invaluable.

[Author and Educator](#)

Early in her career, Alma Lach published a cookbook for children, *A Child's First Cook Book* (1950), with picture recipes and simple instructions for making snacks and party foods. She went on to publish three additional cookbooks for children: *The Campbell Kids Have a Party* (1954), *The Campbell Kids at Home* (1954), and *Let's Cook* (1956).

The success of Alma's children's cookbooks encouraged her to try writing a cookbook for men. The unpublished manuscript for this cookbook includes recipes for meat, salads, and vegetables, which she found to be "appealing to men and at the same time not too exacting."

In 1970 Alma published *Cooking à la Cordon Bleu*. When the Parisian school protested about the use of its name without permission, Harper & Row declined to reissue the book under another title. The rights to the cookbook reverted to Alma and she subsequently republished it, with expanded sections on regional French cuisine, with the University of Chicago Press in 1974 as *How's and Why's of French Cooking*. It was an immediate success.

During this time, she also launched a subscription cooking publication, *Alma's Almanac*. Beginning with the first issue in 1972, the *Almanac* provided seasonal menu plans, recipes, and other culinary hints to its monthly subscribers. In addition to her published books, Alma wrote twice-weekly columns as food editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, as well as a number of magazine articles, booklets, and brochures over the course of several decades. She also spent many years traveling, developing, and testing recipes for a book on Chinese cooking that she was never able to complete.

Le Cordon Bleu

Alma was one of the first Americans to receive the Grand Diplôme from Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris, France. Her husband, Donald, a history professor at the University of Chicago, won a Fulbright Scholarship to study in France in 1949, and they lived together in Paris with their daughter, Sandy, for three one-year periods between then and 1956. At Donald's suggestion Alma decided to enroll at Le Cordon Bleu to occupy her time and, as Donald declared, "...learn to make a sauce. I'm tired of country gravy."

Alma attended Le Cordon Bleu cooking classes during the day, and in the evenings she duplicated the dishes she had made in class at home for Donald and Sandy. If a dish tasted slightly 'off' to her sensitive palate, she worked tirelessly to improve it. She filled several spiral-bound notebooks with French recipes and mastered hundreds of different sauces before earning her diploma in 1956.

Honors and Accolades

Alma Lach received many distinctive awards and honors throughout her culinary career. Early on, as a consequence of earning the Grand Diplôme from Le Cordon Bleu cooking school, she was granted membership in the Légion d'Honneur by the French government and awarded a blue lapel ribbon with accompanying rosettes. Alma wore these while living in France and could reportedly get a table in a crowded restaurant as a result. Back home in Chicago in 1958, she was awarded a mink stole for first prize in the Pillsbury Creative Recipe Content for Newspaper and Magazine Food Editors for her work as food editor at the *Chicago Sun-Times*. Alma was also one of the first American women to be inducted as a full member of the Confrérie des Chevaliers du Tastevin in 1962, an association devoted to promoting the wines and cuisine of Burgundy. In 1964 she became a member of the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, the world's oldest international gastronomic society, founded in Paris in 1248.

Businesswoman

Alma Lach's training at Le Cordon Bleu cooking school was the foundation for her commitment to expanding and perfecting her culinary skills and teaching others, which she accomplished through numerous business endeavors. She became food editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1957, where she wrote Sunday and Thursday columns on gourmet cookery, experimented with recipes in her test kitchen, and learned the art of food photography.

After leaving the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1965, she launched the Alma Lach Cooking School. She started out leading classes on French cuisine, teaching her students the preparation and service of full French dinners and allowing them to develop their own “creative talents in the adventure of fine food.” She eventually expanded the curriculum to include classes on Chinese cuisine and the foods of Japan and India.

Alma made many local and national television appearances over the years to inspire a wide range of audiences. She created, produced, and starred in her own children’s cooking series, *Let’s Cook* (1955), first broadcast on WTTW and then on WGN-TV. She appeared weekly as nutritionist and cooking expert, preparing gourmet dishes for people of retirement age, on the PBS television series, *Over Easy* (1977-78), with Hugh Downs. She also did cooking demonstrations on the *Lee Phillip Show* on WBBM-TV and was a guest on many of the *Today* shows across the country.

As president of Alma Lach Kitchens, Inc., Alma tested recipes and products, created menus, and offered guidance on all aspects of food and dining. She was a consultant to Chicago restaurants The Pump Room, working with Rich Melman of Lettuce Entertain You, and The Berghoff, and she designed gourmet airline meals for Flying Food Fare that debuted on Midway Airlines flights from Chicago to New York.

Inventor: From Haute Cuisine to the Dogs!

Through the vehicle of her business Alma Lach, Inc., Alma developed an ingenious kitchen tool that brought delight to many adults and children. In a letter to a friend in the 1990s Alma wrote, “I’ve gone from ‘Haute Cuisine’ to the Dogs!” She was speaking of her invention, the Curly Dog Cutting Board. The multi-purpose cutting board was patented in 1995, and was sold through department stores, kitchen catalogs, and friends. Alma even sent a Curly Dog Cutting Board to the *David Letterman Show*. Alma also developed additional products that she marketed under the Alma Lach, Inc. name, including a type of soured cream and Steak Char, which was a seasoning that tasted as if your food had been cooked on a grill. Steak Char was originally developed while Alma was the food consultant at The Pump Room, for Rich Melman.

Although not on display, one of Alma's last inventions was known as the Walker Tray. After an accident involving an attempt to hang a piece of her floral artwork, Alma ended up with a broken leg that required the use of a walker until she recovered. Having never needed assistance before, Alma became thoroughly frustrated with the inability to carry one's dinner and drink easily to the table. Once again the lightbulb went off, a design was created, and the Walker Tray was marketed. As her daughter Sandy has pointed out, this invention was created at the tender age of 90.

Culinary Traveler

Alma married University of Chicago History Professor Donald Lach in 1939. The two had a life filled with travel, exploration, and wonderful cuisine. Donald was awarded a Fulbright to do scholarly research in France from 1949-1950, a Social Science Research grant from 1952-1953, and additional funding to work in Asia and Europe in 1955-1956. Alma's travels with Donald to Paris and throughout Europe started for her what was to be a lifetime of culinary pursuits. Their travels together to Europe, China, India, and Japan expanded Alma's interests in the creation and preparation of regional cuisines.

Alma's own expertise, having graduated from Le Cordon Bleu cooking school, allowed her to examine regional cuisine with a careful eye. While traveling through India Alma became interested in how cinnamon was grown, harvested and used. Alma wrote an article she entitled "Stalking the Cinnamon Stick." Alma took these amazing photographs of the local families working with the cinnamon.

Following another culinary trail, Alma pursued the elusive truffle. Hoping to write a feature article, Alma reached out to the world-renowned Urbani family. Carlo Urbani had taken the family's 19th century business and transformed it into a global entity. Alma and Donald visited Italy where they met with Carlo and Paolo Urbani and the truffle hunters and their dogs. Alma learned the art of the hunt and what was needed to forage for truffles. Paolo showed her aspects of the business itself, as Alma participated with the staff as they cleaned and packaged truffles that would be shipped around the world.

Another highlight from Alma's travels was a trip she took to China with Donald in the early 1980s. Alma learned the famous Paris restaurant, Maxim's de Paris, was opening a subsidiary in Beijing. She reached out to the *Chicago Sun-Times* and pitched the idea of writing an article about the new restaurant. Her subsequent critique of the restaurant and its menu did not hold back. Alma clearly respected Chef Jean-Louis Bruneau. She noted the growing pains of a new restaurant; Maxim's Beijing had only recently opened when she visited. Her article highlighted a signature dessert with emphasis on accommodations for the American household chef.

In Alma's Kitchen

The kitchen is a crucial element to the work of any good culinary explorer. Whether during the days when Alma Lach was studying at Le Cordon Bleu cooking school, writing her various cookbooks, or consulting for restaurants and corporate clients, she was in her kitchen experimenting and refining. Alma generally did not cook from recipes, she wrote them. Alma's daughter Sandy recollects "she thought about food all the time. She read cookbooks as one reads sources in advance of writing." Alma could tell if a recipe would work or not. "One had to be able to taste what one was reading, rather than just blindly following a recipe."

Alma loved appetizers, elaborate cocktail party food, and fantastic main dishes. Each meal was an adventure. A favorite was always Pâté de Foie Gras in a rooster mold, decorated elaborately with carved vegetables and a coating of brushed butter that simulated feathers. Alma's attention to detail also extended to the illustrations of kitchen tools and equipment she used for her book, *Hows and Whys of French Cooking*; these line drawings were based on items in her own kitchen.

Alma worked in numerous kitchens throughout her lifetime. Her own kitchen was an amazing space with her cookbook collection and culinary notebooks close at hand. She had an array of copper pots, which she began collecting shortly after graduating from Le Cordon Bleu, all pristinely maintained. Some of her culinary creations also utilized particular terrines and dishes. Featured in the exhibition is a favorite terrine with pheasant lid. Alma's kitchen also served as an official licensed test kitchen, first in their apartment at 5759 Kenwood Avenue,

then at 5750 Kenwood Avenue. When Alma launched her cooking school in 1967, she used kitchens in the Gas Company Auditorium on South Michigan Avenue and later in the International Institute of Foods and Family Living on North Rush Street.

Alma Lach's Culinary Library

Alma Lach amassed a collection of cookbooks during the course of her culinary career that numbered well over 3,000 volumes. The collection ranged from classic American works like *Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book* (1950) and *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook* (1941) to volumes on exotic cuisines such as Russian, Indonesian, Finnish, and Tibetan. The oldest volumes in the collection include ones once owned by her mother, Clara Satorius. They include many handwritten notes, something that Alma also did in her own cookbooks. From these early works, Alma built her culinary collection as a scholar builds a research library.

Of particular interest to Alma were cookbooks produced by church groups. There are well over 100 of them in her collection. Alma was as interested in this genre as she was in the best-selling, classic cookbooks because she felt that the recipes in them were tried and true and therefore could be trusted.

Following the success of her *Hows and Whys of French Cooking*, Alma began research for a cookbook she tentatively titled *The Two Great Cuisines – French and Chinese*. Her collection reflects her extensive work in these areas with hundreds of cookbooks on these two cuisines, in a variety of languages, many heavily annotated by her with notes and changes as she tested recipes.