

Meet Kathleen Hill, Sonoma's keeper of 'Kitchen Memories'

Sonoma writer, collector Kathleen Thompson Hill debuts one-of-a-kind historical culinary display in a permanent exhibit. | 



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If a mustard jar could tell a story, it would probably be about the day in the late 1980s that Julia Child suggested driving to the McDonald's in Sonoma for lunch.

Instead, Sonoma resident, writer and culinary historian Kathleen Thompson Hill wound up making lunch for the world-famous TV chef and their mutual friend, legendary food writer M.F.K. Fisher, at Fisher's home at Bouverie Preserve in Glen Ellen with little more than an eggplant, tomatoes, and some lettuce, as Fisher wasn't keen to oblige Child's request.

Hill, who recently retired as a columnist at the Sonoma Index-Tribune, shared this fascinating nugget of information as we viewed the Julia Child corner at her newly opened Kitchen Memories Collection at Elizabeth Spencer Winery in Rutherford.

A skilled cook, who spent time at the Cordon Bleu in Paris, Hill experienced what sounded like performance anxiety, and understandably so, while mixing oil and vinegar together for a dressing as she made lunch for the pair.

"Julia said 'Why don't you add some Dijon to the vinaigrette?'" Hill recalled as we admired no fewer than half a dozen vintage French mustard jars in her collection.

It's just one of the many stories waiting to be told at the exhibit of historic kitchen utensils and gadgets that Hill began collecting at flea markets and yard sales 50 years ago while traveling with her late husband when they were newlyweds. The collection numbers in the thousands and is thought to be one of the largest kitchen utensil exhibits in the United States.

Not all the stories are Hill's. Each piece in the collection — from the towering pyramid of cracker tins to the cake pans, and cast iron cookware, all have memories attached to them.

"Everything has a story behind it of the family who used it, whoever made it, why they needed it," she said.

That includes a gleaming 1948 Toast-o-lator with a peek-a-boo window that allowed users to see the bread toasting, and an ice cream scoop from the late 1800s invented by Alfred Cralle, a Black businessman and inventor. It was the first to have a built-in, spring-loaded scraper.

Visit the collection

Guests can visit the Kathleen Thompson Hill Kitchen Memories Collection on a hosted tour. Each visit begins with a tasting flight of 5 wines in the Elizabeth Spencer tasting room, housed in an historic brick post office at 1165 Rutherford Rd., Napa.

Fri.-Sun. by appointment

Cost: \$65 with \$2 from each ticket donated to the Salvation Army.

Reservations available at exploretock.com/elizabethspencerwinery/

There are peanut sacks and pestles; milkshake makers and cake carriers; spoons, whisks, and spatulas. It's almost too much to take in, and what's on display is only half of Hill's treasures, which means items will rotate in and out of the exhibit.

"I never sought to create a collection. I just was attracted to all this stuff," she said. "Every time I'd see something new, I'd just smile to myself and think 'Yes!'"

Mobiles of sifters, eggbeaters and cheese graters are suspended above the room, with the oldest and most precious items — like a cheese grater made from a shower drain — positioned near the top out of reach.

Firmly within every visitor's grasp, though, are their own memories stirred up by something they see. Most may be happy like a treasured recipe or laughter around a distant dinner table; others are traumatic like a burn on a screaming hot stove or parents fighting in the kitchen seared into the memory of an impressionable child.

"Not all kitchen memories are good, that's for sure," Hill said. "Those are valid kitchen memories, too."

"I'm carrying these people's memories that they cherish ... They think if they give it to me, it will be well taken care of and I'm thankful for that."— Kathleen Thompson Hill, author and collector

As word got out about Hill's collection, her home became a repository for all kinds of kitchen items from others. She recounted the dentist who drove around with an eggbeater in his car for more than a year waiting to run into her. A new widow who needed her late husband's collection of meat grinders gone. A woman with a box of chipped and cracked dishes of her mother's she couldn't bear to throw away.

"At least once a week something's on my front porch, or my side porch," Hill said.

While we visited, a phone message came in from a woman with an old waffle iron she wanted to give to Hill.

I asked if these unsolicited items were a blessing or a burden. Hill answered without a moment's hesitation.

"It's a blessing," she said. "It's a blessing to be trusted. I'm getting goose bumps just discussing that. To be trusted in that way. I can't say no."

She mentioned another woman who wanted to pass on a rare collection of European cookbooks then let out a heavy sigh indicating the blessing does come with responsibility.

"I'm carrying these people's memories that they cherish but haven't really shared with me, except the tangible vestige of those memories," she said. "They think if they give it to me, it will be well taken care of and I'm thankful for that."

Hill found a willing partner to share that responsibility in Jean-Charles Boisset, proprietor of Boisset Collection wineries, including Elizabeth Spencer Winery where Hill's Kitchen Memories collection is housed. He immediately saw the value in the culinary history and personal stories attached to the items in her vast collection after touring her Kitchen Memories exhibit when it was first displayed at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art in 2013. He approached Hill about creating a permanent home for them. Although she had almost a decade to prepare, letting go of a project 50 years in the making wasn't easy.

"It was a shock at first, because I thought, 'Oh my god, what do I do without it?'" she said. "As I was packing it up with help from a couple of friends, it was very emotional. It's still emotional, but it's being shared."

There are items that Hill isn't ready to part with and will remain in her private collection for the foreseeable future: a Pepsi sign she found at a flea market in Cahors, France and a French biscuit tin with a glass lid.

As we discussed the most useful kitchen tools (her answer was a knife), she pointed to cast iron pans stacked on the museum's fireplace hearth.

"I actually took one of the pans home last week because I realized it's the one that I use for everything," she said.

Apparently, like Hill, it still has some memories to make in her kitchen.

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