



THE HEART & SOUL OF CHEF JACQUES PÉPIN

BY EMILY CAHILL



THE MASTER GOURMAND
ON FOOD, AND THE ART OF LIVING



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM HOPKINS

“When it comes to food, I am open and eager to absorb anything I encounter, wherever I go and whoever I eat with.”

With the holidays swiftly approaching, it's hard to imagine a more inviting scene than sharing food and conversation around the dining table. As autumn gives way to winter's chill, the shorter days become perfectly suited for cozy, intimate gatherings that pair wonderfully with a home cooked meal.

No one knows this better than celebrated French chef, Jacques Pépin. His new cookbook, *Heart & Soul In The Kitchen*, is devoted to dishes that inspire and accompany his own gatherings with family and friends. Weaving lively narrative with classic recipes, personal photos, and his own artwork, the resulting collection is refreshing, approachable, and quintessentially Pépin.

Pépin recently sat down with *Coastal Connecticut* to chat about his latest adventures. In the course of that lively conversation, he shared unique views on cooking, entertaining, and the power of good food to bring people together.

An illustrious career has taken Pépin from Europe to America and countless destinations in between. He's taught widely, hosted numerous television series, and authored more than two dozen cookbooks. A nod to his iconic teaching style, Pépin continues to play a prominent role in culinary education, both as Dean of Special Programs at New York's International Culinary Center and as an Instructor at Boston University's Department of Gastronomy.

Yet, it's the quaint town of Madison, Connecticut, that he and his wife, Gloria, have called home for four decades. It's this very setting that provides the framework for Pépin's latest endeavor, a collection that sets the scene for intimate dinners for two, festive celebrations, and vibrant conversations.

“Think of this book as an invitation to come over to my house for a meal,” he says, welcoming readers to a personal chronicle of what he calls his culinary heart and soul. It's a captivatingly honest book, with candid narrative about recipe conception, cooking for friends, and even making mistakes.

Sitting in Pépin's sun-dappled kitchen at his home, he dis-

cusses *Heart & Soul In The Kitchen* while sharing anecdotes about his life and storied 60-plus-year career.

The new cookbook comes as the companion to *Jacques Pépin: Heart & Soul*, marking his 14th and final cooking program with PBS. As with the book, the 26-episode series offers personal insight into Pépin's life and career, with segments revealing new recipes, family favorites, and an intimate reflection on decades in the kitchen.

While this is the last television series paired with a companion cookbook, Pépin wants to host a program about going back to basics with his 10-year-old granddaughter, Shorey. “Instructions on how to fold a napkin the right way, or how to set up the table ... how to cook an egg or make a sandwich, simple stuff,” he says. “Maybe it'll be called something like ‘Lessons From My Grandfather.’”

While *Heart & Soul* certainly highlights Pépin's expert technique, style, and elegant presentation, his personal take on creativity permeates the text and goes well beyond appearance.

This is for certain: Jacques Pépin is no foodie snob.

“A great deal of creativity is in a home cook,” he says.

“Cooking for six people every night under a budget and having to diversify the menu—that's creativity.”

With today's focus on the new, different, and unexpected, it's easy to lose sight of the paramount pleasure of

dining. It's all about flavor.

For Pépin, his sole requirement is simple, straightforward, and self-evident: A dish must taste good.

“For some young chefs, creativity means using the weirdest possible ingredient,” he says, reflecting on today's fascination with “foodie” culture, particularly molecular gastronomy. “But I want to be able to go to a dish, close my eyes, taste it, and say ‘that's chicken; there's mushroom in it.’ I don't find that to be the case when there are 15 items on a plate.”

And while his own recipes are thoughtfully conceived, tested, adjusted, put on paper and preserved through the pages, Pépin considers each to be a living, continuously evolving work.

“I hope that when someone tries one of my recipes they follow it exactly,” he says. “But it's likely that if you like it, then you'll make





Pépin's playful art and hand drawn menus are a window into his whimsical character.
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it again, and the second time you take a faster look. By the third time you may not even look at it, and by the fourth time, you adjust it and a year later it's your recipe. You don't know where it came from. You have massaged it so that it becomes your own, with your own style."

While *Heart & Soul* highlights timeless French dishes that date back to Pépin's childhood, the collection draws heavily from his internationally celebrated career with recipes that reflect a broad global influence. From Japanese chirashi to a section on French-Mex cuisine—applying French technique to Mexican ingredients—his experiences abroad have yielded a series of dishes that pay homage to his travels and their impact on his cooking.

viewing food as a celebratory social experience best shared with loved ones.

Sumptuous flavors accompany each occasion, and Pépin's Christmas menu traditionally includes an indulgent spread complete with goose, local oysters, rich foie gras and a *Bûche de Noël*, the classic French Christmas log he makes with his granddaughter. His mini chocolate truffles with cognac always make an appearance for dessert. "They're fast, foolproof, and so addictive that I usually reserve my truffle making for the Christmas holidays when excess is always forgiven," he writes in *Heart & Soul*.

With holiday spreads come abundant leftovers, and Pépin never shies away from a chance to use an ingredient, even past its prime. He dedicates a chapter to this concept, *In Praise of Wilted Vegetables*, an ode to both frugality and resourcefulness.

"I never throw anything away at all," he says. "I'm very mindful in the kitchen. When I make a recipe, I can already see in my head what I can do with the scraps. I've actually had some leftovers come out better than the original dish."

Even while approaching 80 years on earth, Pépin remains staunchly hands-on in procuring his ingredients, and the Connecticut shoreline is replete with markets and areas ripe for foraging.

"I use the market as a prep cook," he says, and whether that manifests in a deli-sourced first course of fresh mozzarella, olives, and sun dried tomatoes or a seasonally inspired salad from the farmers' market, Pépin relies on local markets and farm stands. He favors Bishop's Orchard in Guilford, Cole's Farm in Madison, and Chester's farmers' market as area staples. Countless recipes featured in *Heart & Soul* include ingredients that Pépin has personally foraged in and beyond his Madison

property, including more than 20 types of mushrooms alone.

"I'm firmly convinced that being in tune with nature is a prerequisite for being a good cook," he writes, "A thorough understanding of the soil, the trees, the forests, the rivers, and the sea gives you the proper grounding to handle food with the respect and love it is due."

Whether foraging for ingredients or enjoying lively gatherings at home, it's life on the Connecticut shoreline that becomes the backdrop for *Heart & Soul*, a tribute to the impact of friends and family on Jacques Pépin's iconic culinary contributions. ●

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"When it comes to food, I am open and eager to absorb anything I encounter, wherever I go and whoever I eat with," he writes, citing his time in Playa del Carmen as one of the major influences on his cooking over the last 15 years. Mexican-inspired dishes abound throughout *Heart & Soul*, including poached grouper with black bean sauce, tangy Yucatan ceviche, and grilled chicken tenders with chimichurri.

As the holidays draw near, even a cursory glance through Pépin's new book inspires visions for the next unforgettable feast.

"The best holiday for me is Thanksgiving," he says. "There's no political implication, no religious implication, you don't have to give gifts, you just get together to eat and drink. So that, for me, is a perfect holiday." It certainly embodies the spirit of *Heart & Soul*,