



Julie and Julia

Director: Nora Ephron

Country: USA

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*A review by Philip French for **The Observer**:*



There are few more civilised, civilising and generally delightful movies around at the moment than Nora Ephron's *Julie & Julia*, a film that treats two very American subjects the British cinema largely neglects or frowns upon: success, fame and the middle-class dedication to the achievement of excellence. The *Julie and Julia* of the title are real-life women who never met. Julia Child, a major figure in introducing French cuisine to the American middle classes, found late fame as a prolific author of cookery books and a pioneer TV chef. Meryl Streep has her eccentric mannerisms and weird drawl to an affectionately humorous T.

Julie Powell found early, less enduring fame in her 30s by writing a blog as she cooked her way through Child's most famous work, the 734-page *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. In 2005, this became the bestseller *Julie & Julia: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen*, subtitled, for its paperback edition, "*My Year of Cooking Dangerously*".

The project must have had two immediate attractions for Ephron. First, she is a skilled cook. Each chapter of *Heartburn*, her novel about the breakdown of her marriage to Carl Bernstein of Watergate exposé fame, contains a recipe, and in the film version Streep played the heroine.

Second, she's fascinated by people leading parallel lives as in *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, and *You've Got Mail*. Furthermore, this particular formula has succeeded in works whose central characters never actually meet, most recently in *The Hours* where the lives of three women, one of them played by Meryl Streep, are linked by Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*.

The earlier strand of *Julie & Julia* takes place largely in post-Second World War France. The well-educated, upper-middle-class Californian Julia and her husband, Paul Child (Stanley Tucci), the Francophile painter, poet, photographer and member of the US foreign service, have married in 1946, having met in China where both worked for the OSS, forerunner of the CIA.

Three years later, they disembark in Le Havre with their grand American car to drive to Paris where he is to work at the American embassy. They stop in Rouen for a crucial lunch – oysters and sole meunière – which looks as good as it sounds and proves a landmark experience for Julia. She is as entranced by France as Paul is by her. She's a patrician, statuesque 6ft 2in. He's shortish, bald, with a neatly trimmed moustache looking like the postwar Groucho Marx. Indeed, the pair resemble a version of Groucho and Margaret Dumont, had those two been loving and mutually respectful.

The restless Julia tries many things to fill her time, including millinery and bridge, before settling with Paul's encouragement on cooking. After fighting her way into studying at the Cordon Bleu academy, she sets up a cookery school, *L'École des Trois Gourmandes*, with two French friends and then embarks on a book that will take nearly a decade to complete.

This witty, beautifully observed narrative is interwoven with one set half a century later. In 1950s Paris, the liberal Paul Child is beset by McCarthy-era investigators who suspect that any government employee who has served in China may be guilty of treason. In 2002 New York, America is troubled again, and Julie Powell has a heartbreaking job with a government department charged with handling public and personal problems following the destruction of the World Trade Centre.

She's discontented, unfulfilled, left behind by high-flying Ivy League contemporaries and unhappy in her unglamorous apartment above a pizza cafe in dreary Queens. Another supportive figure, her husband, Eric (Chris Messina), a magazine editor, encourages her to find herself through her cooking and her blog. For Julie, Julia becomes a mother figure, an imaginary friend, a source of inspiration, and it's appropriate that she's played by Amy Adams, who last year was the young nun working in the shadow of Meryl Streep's mother superior in *Doubt*, just as it is pleasing that Stanley Tucci, who is so perfectly unclonable as the humorous, considerate Paul, should have played the devoted gay associate of Streep's fashion magazine editor in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

Sex and food are never far apart in this picture, so it is inevitable that when Julie becomes fascinated by revelations about Julia's *vie sexuelle*, we should think of a daughter discovering her mother has had exotic amorous experiences in two other Streep pictures, *The Bridges of Madison County* and *Mamma Mia!*

There is no question that the liberating adventures of Julia in Paris are more interesting than the relatively trivial travails of Julie in New York, just as no one could think Julie's achievements as on a par with Julia's. Yet the two lives hang together and the experiences of their heroines placed alongside each other offer revelations about social and cultural change over the past 60 years, from the staid age of the telex and the manual typewriter to the ubiquity of the personal computer and the mobile phone.



If I have one real criticism of *Julie & Julia*, it is the failure to mention our own Elizabeth David who was born a few months after Child, had similarly exciting times abroad during the Second World War and, as Julia would have been the first to admit, published books on French and Mediterranean food a decade before Julia's seminal work. This is rather like Tom Hanks (a familiar face in Nora Ephron films) storming up Omaha beach on D-Day in *Saving Private Ryan* and no mention being made of the British Second Army coming ashore on Gold, Juno and Sword beaches to the east.

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