

AROUND FRENCH COOKING IN 365 DAYS

Cooking blog turns memoir

BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

JULIE AND JULIA: 365 Days, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen: How One Girl Risked Her Marriage, Her Job, and Her Sanity to Master the Art of Living: memoir by Julie Powell. Little, Brown and Company, 2005. Hardcover, \$23.95.

When I first heard about Julie Powell's book, a recollection of her year spent cooking her way through Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking Vol. I* — and blogging as she cooked — I did what any underpaid, internet-savvy reader would do: checked to see if the blog was still up. It was, and as I couldn't quite justify the price of a hardback book versus, say, making credit card payments, I started reading.

Powell's blog is addictive. A Texan in New York, she'd moved to the big city dreaming of fame and fortune. Instead, she got a temp-turned-permanent secretary job that left her unhappy, unfulfilled and directionless. Her mom's ancient copy of *MtAoFC*, as Powell refers to it, was the inspiration for The Julie/Julia Project, in which she would cook 524 recipes — including kidneys, lobster, marrow and brains — over the course of a year. Great idea, right? Why didn't I think of that?

Reading Julie Powell after the fact is — though hysterical and unexpectedly educational — a little heartbreaking. I wanted to be there with her, posting comments and encouragement as dishes refused to gel, lobsters squirmed and the final season of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" was unsatisfactory. Her online text is off-the-cuff, unfiltered and unedited. She breaks down, throws things, cries often, gets frustrated, makes fantastic food, mocks the price of truffles, briefly runs away to Texas, drinks vodka gimlets and nearly gives up at least a couple of times.

I only got to May (the Project ran August 2002-August 2003) in the blog before *Julie and Julia*, the book, landed in my lap. It's a couple years later now, and Powell has mellowed out a bit. Her book, though it doesn't gloss over the messy bits, is more a book about how blogging about cooking changed her life than it is either a reprint of her blog or a story about learning to cook French food. *Julie and Julia* is like the grown-up, more respectable version of Powell's online outpourings: Neater, tidier, less dramatic.

Which isn't to say the book doesn't have its fair share of drama. Powell's move is a pain, and her new apartment has more than its fair share of plumbing trouble. Her mom pleads with her to stop cooking. Her single friends have all sorts

of romantic issues. From time to time the Project wreaks havoc on Powell's love life, though for the most part her husband,

Eric, is a patient, encouraging partner, eating everything she cooks and talking her down from her snits. The internet also offers some drama, including a lengthy debate among her "bleaders" (blog readers) about ways to cook rice and comments from a few folks who really wish Powell would tone down the swearing.

The inclusion of what I take to be the best of many reader comments the blog received is fantastic. The snippets of fiction, on the other hand, are slightly less so. Each chapter begins with an imagined (though based on fact) scene from the life of Julie and Paul Child, giving Powell a way to trace her own life's arc alongside Julia's. It doesn't exactly work — in large

part because the prose is a bit stiff in comparison with Powell's own goofy, giddy, self-deprecating voice — but it does offer an interesting view of Julia Child written with clear love and admiration.

It's fascinating, entertaining and even inspiring to read how Powell took her I'm-almost-30-what-have-I-done-with-my-life stress and literally made something — many somethings! — with it. But she didn't just make a year's worth of rich French food and wind up with a book deal, outstanding as those achievements are. In the process, she also made her life into something in which she could find joy. "Feel free to hate me," she writes near the book's end. "I certainly would." ★

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