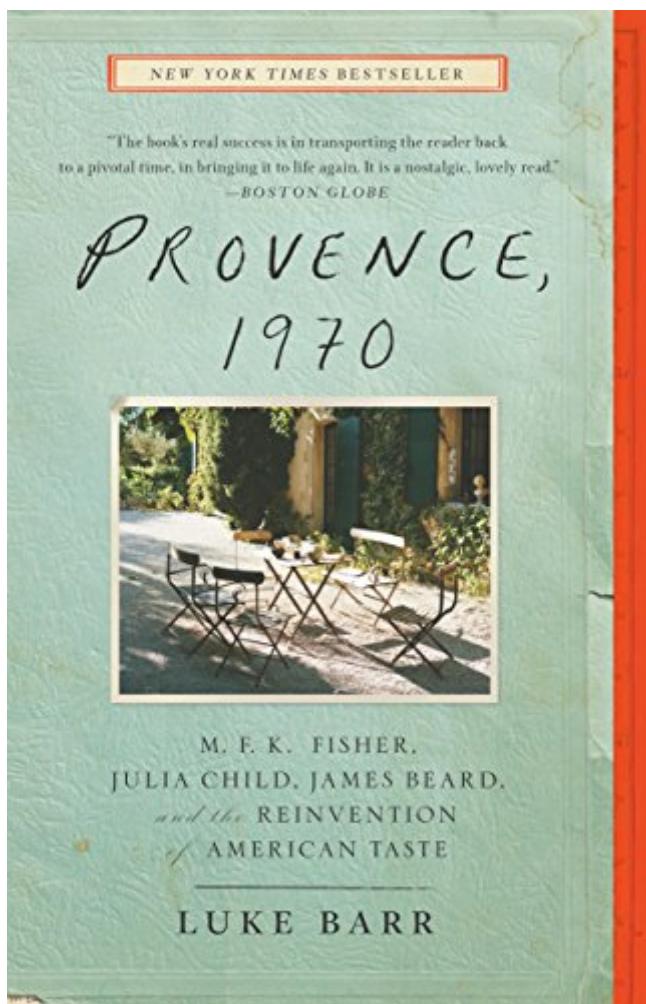


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# Provence, 1970: M.F.K. Fisher, Julia Child, James Beard, And The Reinvention Of American Taste



## Synopsis

Provence, 1970 is about a singular historic moment. In the winter of that year, more or less coincidentally, the iconic culinary figures James Beard, M.F.K. Fisher, Julia Child, Richard Olney, Simone Beck, and Judith Jones found themselves together in the South of France. They cooked and ate, talked and argued, about the future of food in America, the meaning of taste, and the limits of snobbery. Without quite realizing it, they were shaping today's tastes and culture, the way we eat now. The conversations among this group were chronicled by M.F.K. Fisher in journals and letters—some of which were later discovered by Luke Barr, her great-nephew. In Provence, 1970, he captures this seminal season, set against a stunning backdrop in cinematic scope—complete with gossip, drama, and contemporary relevance.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is written by a grand-nephew of M.F.K. Fisher and is the story of the conjunction of the stars: Fisher, James Beard and Julia Child. They meet in Southern France and they go back and forth across the Atlantic, changing how Americans viewed and cooked food, expanding our horizons

and also struggling with editors, wayward marriages, bad health and difficult partners and a life as a TV celeb. It's all great reading, and Barr does a superb job. Barr had access to the family records, which were boxes upon boxes of papers in a storage unit. Stacked--he said, to the ceiling. He went through them with patience and assiduity--and we are rewarded with this book, which has tidbits and stories, as well as information that you may never have read about M. F. K. Fisher. She was her own biographer in her essays, but her writing is veiled in many cases, so the view from the outside is one that adds perspective. We see much more about Julia (and Paul Child) as well as Simca (Simone Beck, co-author of Child) and sister Norah, Mary Frances' traveling partner. We even see more about "Chexbres" or Dillwyn Parrish, the love of her life and a painter. She was always oblique about "Chexbres" but we see him in the distance, true, but more directly. I'm a huge admirer of M. F. K. Fisher's essays, of which Auden said were the best of American literature. I so agree. So a funny moment: I'm acquainted with someone who was friends with Fisher and often spent time at the house in Glen Ellen. I asked her one day "Oh, so you knew M. F. K. Fisher. How I envy you--wish I had visited her when she was alive. I LOVE her writing." Blank stare from Fisher friend: "She...wrote?"

Provence, 1970; M.F.K. Fisher, Julia Child, James Beard, and the Reinvention of American Taste by Luke Barr touches on areas such as the expat-bohemian way of life (page 69), There is also an interesting statement, made in the book (on page 132), where Julia Childs considered New York Times critic Craig Clairborne a snob, even though she liked and respected him. Supporting reasons were given such as; Clairborne mentioned that no American cooking could touch France's greatest and then there was the letter. Julia Childs and her husband Paul wrote Clairborn a letter to protest his subtle criticism of Henry Haller, a White House Swiss-American chef under Nixon And LBJ, and who was popular for his state dinners (page 133).

This lovely and satisfying book took me back in time to when the food culture of the United States was radically changing. I was newly married, and I vividly remember that in Chicago there was an explosion of really interesting and diverse restaurants. Those of my childhood and teen years were pretty nondescript, and the food offerings quite consistently American, unless you were in one of the restaurants in Chinatown or Little Italy along Taylor Street. It was all pretty boring. But quite suddenly, almost as if someone had turned on a light switch, everything seemed to be changing. There were now even cookbooks that thankfully moved beyond Betty Crocker in their imagination and ingredients. Provence, 1970 helped me understand why. Of course, I was a fan of Julia Child

and watched her show religiously. I owned her Mastering the Art of French Cooking and still make the leek and potato soup from it ... by far the easiest recipe in the book. But I wasn't really aware of the fascinating people (beyond Julia) that were behind this movement that was enriching my life and opening up so many possibilities. Luke Barr's book is well-written and provides both a realistic view of these people as human beings and a reverence for the past and for what they contributed to our present. I especially loved the last chapter when Barr and his family went to some of the places chronicled in the rest of the book. It was described with great tenderness and awakened my own feelings of nostalgia for that time and for the past we can never fully retrieve no matter how hard we try. Disclaimer. I am also a certified Francophile and a lover of Provence in particular. I happily add this to the list of books I recommend to others with that same condition. What this book has in common with many of the others on my list is the passion for life, the *joie de vivre*, it depicts that is emblematic of the French spirit. Food accompanied by good conversation is surely one of the greatest of life's pleasures. *N'est-ce pas?*

I was really interested to learn more about this seminal coming together of these influential foodies and how they might have related to and creatively affected one another's trajectory to begin the evolution of cuisine in America. I also love MFK Fisher - her writing is colorful and to the point. I wanted to read her words not her nephew's interpretations and seemingly made-up conclusions about what happened. Very disappointing!!! I did not select this for our Food Lit book group for that reason. Check out Lulu's *Procencal Kitchen* instead. Much more lively and primary to the time.

I really enjoyed reading this book, but not quite as much as I had hoped. Written by MFK Fisher's grand-nephew, the book delves into the story behind a very unique time, when various culinary notables all found themselves in Provence at the same time. Based on Fisher's diaries, readers get a glimpse of dinners and get-togethers against the backdrop of Provence, as well as other parts of France. The writing is mostly engaging, especially when describing each individual dish at a particular gathering, but at times the author seems to lose steam. Personally, I wanted more quotes gleaned directly from the diaries than what I got, perhaps the addition of a few photos. Bringing the story back to the present day did nothing for me. Diction became annoyingly repetitive. I loved getting a glimpse into this time in the lives of so many my favorite chefs and food writers, I just wanted more.

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