

# The New York Times

## No One Parties Like Jacques Pépin, Even at 90

The beloved chef, who brought French cooking skills to the American masses, is celebrating his upcoming birthday with 90 parties around the country.



The chef Jacques Pépin won't turn 90 until Dec. 18, but that hasn't stopped him from celebrating the milestone at one of 90 parties. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times



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Reporting from Millbrook, N.Y.

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Jacques Pépin couldn't help himself: The buttercream frosting on his strawberry sheet cake looked too luscious. Slicing it for dozens of guests at his birthday party on Saturday, he stuck in his index finger, took a swipe and licked.

"Sorry," he said, when his daughter, Claudine Pépin, caught him, and scolded with her eyes. (When she wasn't looking, he did it again.)

Mr. Pépin is turning 90 this year, on Dec. 18, and to mark the milestone the [Jacques Pépin Foundation](#) has helped orchestrate [90 birthday parties](#), all around the country, at temples of gastronomy like the French Laundry, Restaurant Daniel and Gabriel Kreuther, but also at the local Irish pub near his home in Madison, Conn.



The enthusiasm surprised Mr. Pépin, who was never big on birthdays. On the eve of a to-do in Washington, D.C., for his 80th, he had a minor stroke. He recovered quickly, and even tried to attend (his family nixed that idea). Now, at his age, "certainly I am celebrating a lot more than I ever did," he said.

Fine dining chefs, gourmards and students — home cooks, too — all leaped at the chance to honor Mr. Pépin, who began his formal training [at 13](#), and whose career is unparalleled in the food world.

He fed numerous heads of state as the personal chef to French presidents, including Charles de Gaulle, and [redefined mass dining](#) with the Howard Johnson hotel chain. With his foundational photo-laden text "La Technique," in 1976, he made French culinary expertise accessible for amateurs and professionals alike; two decades later, he demystified sauces and deboned chicken for TV audiences, often alongside his friend Julia Child on PBS.

"Jacques introduced us to many of the classical French dishes, but with simplified preparation," said Martha Stewart, who cooked with both of them. "I consider him the male counterpart to Julia."

He has won 16 James Beard awards and, by his family's count, published 8,000 recipes; a new cookbook, his 35th, is coming in September, illustrated with his own paintings. After starting during the pandemic, he has continued making short cooking videos for his nearly 2 million Facebook followers.

And though his life was upended by the death, in 2020, of his wife of 54 years, [Gloria Pépin](#), and this year, of his closest friend, [the chef Jean-Claude Szurdak](#), in his ninth decade Mr. Pépin is still full of charm, jokes and joie de vivre (helped, he might be the first to say, by his 300 bottle wine cellar).



Julia Child and Jacques Pépin, friends and seminal television co-hosts, cooking in her kitchen in Cambridge, Mass., in 1999. Suzanne Kreiter/The Boston Globe, via Getty Images

“He really celebrates beauty — mostly culinary beauty — every day,” said Rick Bayless, the Chicago chef, fellow TV star and a longtime friend of Mr. Pépin. “And he makes space in his life for creativity.”

Mr. Bayless, who did dinner number 51 of 90, an intimate (and high priced) Mexican market meal at his home, called Mr. Pépin “the best culinary technician in the world.”

“The way that he could imagine flavors told me that he had an encyclopedic knowledge of possibilities,” Mr. Bayless said. “It comes from a deep love of what he’s doing.”

On Saturday, guests streamed to him, to pay their respects, get their grandmother’s copy of his cookbooks signed, snap selfies and gab about dinner. The food writer Raymond Sokolov, who was the New York Times restaurant critic in the 1970s, recalled meeting Mr. Pépin in 1971, when he was “making cucumbers do tricks” in a sauté pan. The chef Terrance Brennan was one of many who called Mr. Pépin a continuing inspiration: “We’re all just kind of catching up.”

The events benefit [his foundation](#), started in 2016 to promote food education and support community kitchens nationwide. His daughter, Claudine, is the president and her husband, Rollie Wesen, is the executive director.

Mr. Wesen said the “90/90” campaign has resulted in its busiest year, doubling revenue. With 35 parties still to come, it has raised nearly \$1 million, he said. On Saturday, Barbara Tober, the owner of Yellowframe Farm, and a philanthropist, art patron and former [magazine editor](#), donated \$25,000.



Mr. Pépin is a spirited pétanque player. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times



For the festivities, the French 75 cocktail was renamed the “Jacques 90.” Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

As her horses whinnied in the background, the birthday boy spent the afternoon clinking coupes of a “Jacques 90” — a rechristened French 75 cocktail — and sampling Provençal-themed hors d’oeuvres, before sitting for a four-course dinner. The menu, illustrated with florals and butterflies by Mr. Pépin, included sea scallops and caviar, roasted veal with a chive cream sauce, and a 1999 Chateau d’Yquem Sauternes as digestif.

He hit it off with another guest, Philippe Petit, the French high wire artist. Meeting for the first time, they marveled in French about how they almost intersected at Windows on the World, the restaurant atop the World Trade Center, which Mr. Pépin helped open; Mr. Petit became a regular after his unauthorized tightrope crossing between the buildings, in 1974.

On a course set up in the horse riding rink, the men played pétanque, the French lawn game Mr. Pépin has loved since his boyhood near Lyon.

He competes weekly as part of a league in Madison, which hosts its own seasonal bacchanals. At the last one, [a seated dinner for 50](#) at his home a week or so ago, “we had a lot of good stuff,” he said, including a whole roast lamb; “caviar, of course; crab cakes; brandade.” The competition is convivial, especially because “we almost drank a hundred bottle of wine.”



The chef Brandon Chrostowski offers Mr. Pépin a selection of oysters outside the kitchen. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times



An appetizer of scallops and caviar. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

“So yes,” he added with a distinct twinkle, in a video interview with The Times a few days before the Yellowframe party. “My life could be worse, you know.”

He was speaking from his home kitchen, in front of the pegboard full of pots and pans that has become his visual signature. He no longer uses the copper ones — “too heavy,” he said. In fact he cooks for himself far less than he used to (family-members like Mr. Wesen, [a chef and instructor](#), fill the gaps; if Mr. Pépin wants sweetbreads, it happens). His appetites have shrunk, too, he admitted. But, he added, “I am kind of a glutton. So if you put it in front of me, I will eat it.”

Mr. Pépin is only attending a fraction of the birthday bashes — some back issues preclude him from traveling as much as he’d like. But his spirit is animating all of them.

“He’s a beacon,” said Ouita Michel, the chef and an owner of [Holly Hill Inn](#), near Lexington, Ky., which hosted the 55th party on Sunday. Ms. Michel has never met Mr. Pépin, but even onscreen, his energy and joy was infectious. “I onetime heard him say ‘happy bubble,’” she recalled. “And I’ve told a million young cooks, yes, you want that stock at a happy boil, a happy bubble.”

In the residential kitchen of the farm’s guesthouse, the chef Brandon Chrostowski led a team of mostly newbies, some of them shucking oysters and slicing foie gras for the first time.



The birthday boy with Mrs. Tober to his left, in glasses. Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

His Cleveland restaurant, [Edwins](#), was both host of an earlier birthday dinner and a beneficiary of the foundation; he trains and hires formerly incarcerated people for the hospitality industry. (He was also for many years Mrs. Tober’s personal chef.)

On Friday, just as he was in Manhattan picking up ingredients, he learned that his wife, Catana Chrostowski, was in labor with their fifth child. He flew home, met his new son, then drove through the night to finish the meal at Yellowframe.

The dedication paid off. Mr. Pépin requested a spoon for the celadon-colored sauce in the scallop dish, licking the back of it clean. In his toast, he talked about the connective power of cooking.

“You bring people into the kitchen, and you can redo a life,” he said.

Long after the other guests departed, and Mrs. Tober had gone to sleep, Mr. Pépin was still kibitzing and taking photos with the beaming young chefs. He didn’t make it home until the wee hours. He is, it turns out, always the last one to leave a party.

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