

FOOD

CT's Jacques Pépin celebrates 90th birthday with 90 dinners and 90 chefs

From Boston's Jody Adams and Jeremy Sewell to José Andres, Thomas Keller and New Haven's Emily Mingrone, chefs are honoring French cuisine master Jacques Pépin.

By **Daniel Figueroa IV**, Staff Writer

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Famed French Chef Jacques Pépin joins actor Chris Sarandon for a live taping of Sarandon's podcast at the Sacred Heart Community Theater in Fairfield on Saturday, Jan. 21, 2023.

Daniel Figueroa IV/Hearst Connecticut Media

For more than seven decades, Jacques Pépin has changed the face of French cooking through [television shows](#) like "Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home" and a litany of cookbooks.

As the famed chef and Madison resident approaches his milestone 90th birthday on Dec. 18 next year, the [Jacques Pépin Foundation](#) has launched the 90/90 campaign to honor his legacy and raise awareness and funds for the Foundation's work, which empowers people to cook and better their lives.



Julia Child cooks with Jacques Pépin in her kitchen in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
Boston Globe/Boston Globe via Getty Images

The Foundation, which was founded in 2016 by Pépin, his daughter Claudine Pépin, and his son-in-law, executive director Rollie Wesen, has steadily expanded its programs since 2017.

"We teach and inspire people to cook, and we do that in a lot of different ways and for a lot of different reasons," Wesen, who is also a professor at Johnson & Wales University, said. "It helps people gain confidence and a sense of purpose. It's good for economic benefit because people who know how to cook can save money and potentially get the skills they need to get a job. And it's good for their health because if you're cooking from scratch, you're much less likely to get chronic diseases that are diet related, which can be fatal and very difficult to manage."

For Pépin's 90th birthday, the Foundation is organizing 90 dinners across the country with 90 renowned chefs. These events, designed to raise funds and awareness for the Foundation, offer a unique opportunity to support the future of culinary education, Wesen said.

The table for many of the 90 dinners has already been set.

"We did three events in Boston. We were at Jody Adams' La Padrona and then at Jeremy Sewell's Row 34," Wesen said. "Those events are designed to raise awareness about the Foundation, raise some money for the Foundation and remind people of all the good quality work Jacques has done over the years."



Pépin and, from left, chefs Renee Touponce, Emily Mingrone and Chrissy Tracey share a moment with a steamship round prepared by Mingrone during Pépin's 87th birthday dinner and celebration in December at Stone Acres Farm in Stonington.
Lisa Nichols for Hearst CT Media

Wesen said many dinners still need to be planned and are not ready to be announced. But they'll be updated at the site www.celebratejacques.org. Connecticut's Emily Mingrone, who owns New Haven's Fair Haven Oyster Co., announced on social media that she'd be hosting one of the 90/90 dinners in a social media post. Pépin himself stopped by the restaurant after Mingrone [hosted a Julia Childs-Jacques Pépin themed dinner](#) last month.

"Check us out as one of the featured restaurants on Jacques 90/90 journey — 90 restaurants this year for his 90th birthday," Mingrone wrote in the post. "Extremely humbled to be listed alongside so many of the greats."



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Each dinner is flexible, allowing chefs to host events that fit their unique styles. Whether through a high-end tasting menu or a monthly Pépin-inspired dish, chefs can pledge a portion of their earnings to support the Foundation's mission.

"It's really about the chefs doing what feels comfortable for them and what feels right for them. Chefs are so generous anytime you want to throw a fundraiser," Wesen said. "Whether your cause is breast cancer or multiple sclerosis, or you name it, chefs are there donating their time, donating their energy, activating their teams to help out good causes. Chefs are really, really generous, particularly when you're talking about something that speaks to them, like culinary education and the contributions that Jacques made."

The campaign also includes an opportunity for home cooks to get involved. In early 2025, The Foundation will launch a home-cook version of the campaign, inviting people to host small dinner parties or gatherings in honor of Pépin's birthday. Participants can do anything from hosting a Tupperware party where they toast Pépin to cooking from one of his books and donating to the Foundation. The Foundation will recognize the home cooks with a digital scrapbook celebrating their contribution.

"Unlike any other chef, Jacques bridges the entire spectrum of cooks from somebody just starting to professionals," Wesen said. "This campaign is designed to give everyone who appreciates Jacques, everyone who feels like they benefited from Jacques, an opportunity to celebrate him for his 90th birthday."

At its core, Wesen said the 90/90 campaign isn't just about celebrating a chef's career; it's about preserving Jacques Pépin's ethos for future generations. He noted that Pépin's teachings serve as a reminder that the best way to approach food is with joy and simplicity.

"We want Jacques' teachings to live on for decades to come," Wesen said. "Cooking may evolve, but the foundational techniques Jacques taught us will always remain relevant. One of the things I've learned from Jacques is that cooking should never feel intimidating. He makes it approachable, and that's the legacy we're trying to preserve."



Jacques Pépin in his Connecticut kitchen.
Frank Whitman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Wesen said the Foundation is committed to celebrating Jacques' work and ensuring that his contributions continue to inspire for years to come.

"I didn't build the foundation to outlive Jacques," he said. "I built it to outlive me. I want his legacy—his techniques, his recipes, his generosity—to continue far beyond any of us."

Some of the [Foundation's programs include its Community Kitchen Support initiative](#). Through this program, the Foundation offers grants to community kitchens nationwide, helping adults with barriers to employment—like the previously incarcerated or unhoused—gain culinary skills. Wesen said these life-changing programs equip participants with food safety knowledge and entry-level skills, preparing them for careers in the food service industry.

Beyond grants, the Foundation offers free culinary education through a vast online library, including hundreds of recipes and videos. The Foundation reaches nearly 3 million followers through platforms like YouTube and Instagram, making Jacques' teachings available to the masses.

"He's appreciated by both the finest chefs, like Thomas Keller and José Andrés, and home cooks who've followed his PBS shows," explains Wesen. "Jacques bridges the gap between these two worlds."

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