

From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

Vocabulary of cooking

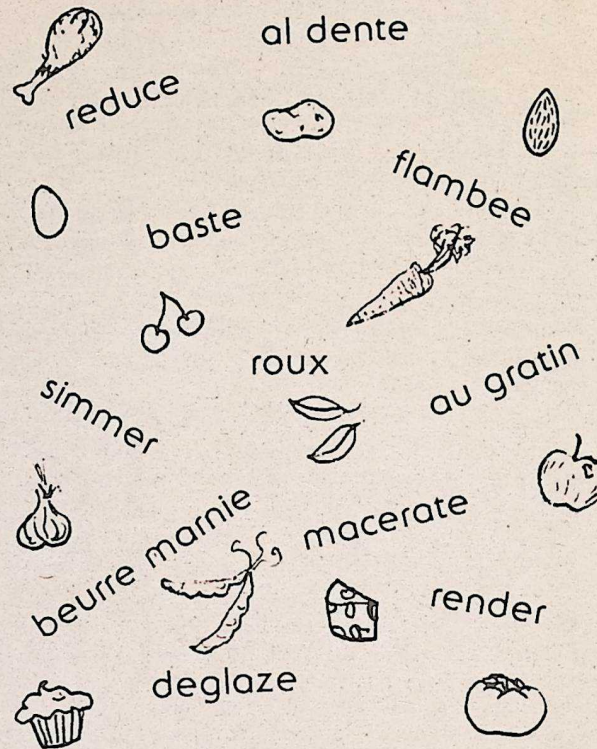
by Lydia Lovell

Like most experienced cooks, Aunt Olivia's vocabulary was rich in her field of expertise; in using it, she taught me terms for ways we prepare foods. At the time, I was almost unaware of learning because Aunt Olivia demonstrated while she talked, told me stories about her own experiences, set me to reading cookbooks whenever she saw me hesitate about a procedure and, if I couldn't find a good description, she showed me by doing it herself while I watched. Then I tried.

When we made goat cheese, for example, and stored it in the cellar to age under controlled temperature and humidity until its flavor had mellowed and matured, Aunt Olivia explained that other foods, too, needed aging. Uncle Henry's wines and liquors were aged to improve their quality, and meats such as smoked hams were hung to age.

When we cooked pasta, Aunt Olivia taught me to test for exactly the right state of doneness by lifting one string of spaghetti or a single piece of macaroni from the boiling pot and biting it to see if it had reached the proper consistency. For "al dente," (Italian for "to tooth"), pasta should be tender all the way through, but still retain the barest resistance at the very center. Not all Americans prefer pasta cooked al dente; some like it cooked until it is mushy. Aunt Olivia insisted that for any pasta dish to be mixed with a sauce, then baked, the pasta be boiled only to the al dente stage.

Like the words "al dente," much of the vocabulary of cooking comes from European languages. Many French cooks have enviable reputations, and many French terms are used in recipes. "Au gratin" is one such and means a food mixed with a white sauce, topped with crumbs and butter or cheese, and baked or broiled until brown. Some other French terms are: "beurre marnie," a mixture of soft



butter and flour formed into small balls and used to thicken soups and sauces; "bouquet garni," a small cheesecloth bag containing sprigs of parsley, a clove of garlic, thyme, bay leaf, a few whole cloves, and/or any other desired herbs. Aunt Olivia taught me to use an empty tea bag to make bouquet garni.

A common word, "entree," is French and refers to a meal's main dish. To "flambee" is to add flavor of liquor (but no alcohol) by heating liquor, igniting it, and pouring it over food. When the flames die and the alcohol has burned off, the food is stirred and served. Sauce for Crepes Suzette is an example of flambee. "Gratine," also French, means foods sprinkled with buttered crumbs or cheese and run under the broiler for a browned crust. More familiar may be the French term, "Julienne," for food sliced into narrow strips, lengthwise, as green beans or potatoes.

A French chef from Lyon gave his city's name to a method for using leftover carrots or potatoes. He chopped them in large dice, sauteed them with butter and onions, and called them "Lyonnaise." Uncle Henry was particularly fond of Lyonnaise potatoes; sometimes Aunt Olivia treated him to freshly boiled potatoes Lyonnaise. Although many of us think only baby foods are pureed, almost any food can be reduced to a thick smooth consistency in a blender or food processor, but the French did it originally by cooking, mashing, and forcing food through a sieve. That's how Aunt Olivia taught me to make a puree. No proper gravy is made without a "roux," a combination of fat and flour cooked together, then added to liquids to thicken them. Roux, too, is French, as is saute, frying foods quickly over high heat in a little fat.

In straight American, we baste foods, usually meats, by moistening them with pan juices or special sauces, while they bake or roast. And we blanch food by par-boiling or

pouring boiling water over it, then draining and rinsing with cold water. Aunt Olivia removed skins from almonds and tomatoes by blanching them; before canning fresh vegetables, she blanched them to shrink them so more could be packed into a jar. Boiling is cooking anything in any liquid hot enough to bubble constantly. Simmering is cooking food in liquid kept just below the boiling point. And steaming is cooking food over, not in, boiling water, so that steam, not water, does the job. Because steam is hotter than boiling water, vegetables may cook a little more quickly when steamed, are less likely to disintegrate during cooking, and retain more nutrients. Poaching is similar to simmering, but less water is used and the result is an excellent stock for adding to soups and stews and in which other foods can be cooked.

Broiling is cooking food on a rack under very hot direct heat. Frying is cooking in fat, on top of the stove. Deep-frying is cooking in a lot of fat. Roasting is baking in an oven. Baking is also done in an oven. Roasting usually refers to meats ... baking, to casseroles, breads, or desserts.

There are other things done with and to foods that enhance flavors or otherwise improve them. Melted butter contains some solids ... we clarify it by skimming off the foam on the surface and pouring off the clear fat that floats above the solids. Sugar may be caramelized to give breads, cakes, sauces, and desserts distinctive taste and color. To caramelize, heat granulated sugar very slowly, stirring constantly, until it melts and turns a light brown color.

We deglaze a pan by removing cooked food and adding a little liquid, stirring and scraping up crusty bits while bringing liquid to a boil. The resulting sauce is served with meats. Degreasing, on the other hand, is removing fat from liquids by skimming or by refrigerating until fat solidifies on top and can be lifted off. Dredging means coating with flour, very fine crumbs, or sugar. To macerate is to soak fruits in flavored liquids so they absorb flavors. Marinating is soaking in a marinade; a marinade is an herb, oil, and acid (usually vinegar, but citrus juice may be used) mixture to tenderize and flavor foods. Masking is covering completely with sauce, cream, mayonnaise, and so forth.

To reduce a liquid, we boil it, driving off water as steam. To render, we heat meat slowly until fats melt and can be drained. We score meat by slashing part way through its outer surface, thus allowing fats to drain while cooking and connective tissues to tenderize. And we sear by browning the surface of meat quickly with intense heat, usually in a hot pan or oven, to seal in juices. We try out fat from meat, usually bacon or salt pork, by heating slowly until fat liquifies and leaves the meat. Trying out is similar to rendering, but is carried further, until meaty portions are crisp and golden, but never burned.

These are but a few of the more common terms every good cook should understand in order to use cookbooks to best advantage. Aunt Olivia taught me through demonstration, explaining every action. Her lessons combined loving attention to both her young pupil and the details of our tasks. As the pupil I was hardly aware of all the information she was packing into my head during our cooking sessions which I looked upon as time spent sharing happy activities with my beloved Aunt Olivia. And in truth, I believe, she felt the same way.