



PHOTO: DENISE BINA

ANNE WILLAN

The La Varenne Way

Anne Willan and La Varenne (above), her cooking school housed in a 17th-century chateau in France



At first glance, this proper Cambridge-educated, grand dame of cuisine would seem to have little in common with a mafia don. Looks can be deceiving; those “in the know” are well aware of The La Varenne Mafia and The La Varenne Way. The La Varenne Way has evolved with Anne Willan’s experience of more than 35 years as a teacher, cook-book author, and food writer. She is known on both sides of the Atlantic as a leading authority on the cuisine of France and its culinary history. As the director of *École de Cuisine La Varenne*, the cooking school that she founded in 1975 with the encouragement and support of the grand doyenne herself, Julia Child, Willan has shaped and influenced countless professional and amateur cooks all over the world.

By Virginia Willis



An elegant feast at La Varenne; (below) zucchini salad straight from the garden; (bottom) a bounty of French produce

PHOTO: LANGDON CLAY



PHOTO: LANGDON CLAY



PHOTO: DENISE BINA

Willan's body of work is astonishing. Her books have been published in two dozen countries and translated into 18 languages. Her awards include Bon Appétit Cooking Teacher of the Year, Grande Dame of Les Dames d'Escoffier International, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from International Association of Culinary Professionals. Practically every major food magazine in the United States has a La Varenne alumnus on its staff who is intimately familiar with The La Varenne Way. The alumni are called, tongue in cheek, The La Varenne Mafia. No secret society, the list of *capos* reads like a who's who of the culinary world. It includes, among others: chef and cookbook author Gale Gand; *New York Times Magazine* Food Editor Amanda Hesser; *The Barbecue Bible* author chef Stephen Raichlen; James Beard award-winning chef Ana Sortun; award-winning cookbook author Molly Stevens; Executive Food Editor, *Food & Wine* magazine, Tina Ujlaki; and Executive Food Editor, *Gourmet* magazine, Zanne Early Stewart.

Pause for a moment and think how many home cooks are reached by these alumni, and how many recipes are written in La Varenne style. Cookbook author Molly Stevens says, "I would not be where I am today if it weren't for Anne Willan and La Varenne. In addition to the invaluable culinary training I garnered in France, working directly with Anne over the years opened countless doors and opened my eyes to the pos-

sibility of making a career by teaching and writing. In addition, Anne is one of the hardest working individuals I know, and her drive for perfection has long been an inspiration.”

Originally based in Paris, La Varenne is now housed in the 17th-century Château du Feÿ. I arrived at La Varenne in 1995, initially as an editorial stagiaire, or apprentice. Working in exchange for room and board, I was able to polish my cooking, writing, and editorial skills testing recipes for *Cook It Right* (Reader’s Digest, 1997), a comprehensive work that documents various states of cooking. It was hard work, long hours, and not a whole lot of freedom - after all I was living with my boss, or rather the Don. New apprentices are low on the totem pole and chores encompassed more than just the kitchen. It’s similar to interning at a country inn, with duties including pre-dawn baguette runs, toting luggage up winding flights of ancient stairs, and picking cherries for the breakfast jam. Of course, my room was in the château and board included produce delivered each morning from the *potager*, still damp with the morning dew. It was a precious opportunity to learn how to actually cook it right from Anne herself.

I developed a tremendous respect for her work ethic and knowledge about food and cooking. Her way, The La Varenne Way, is based on a regimen of rigorous recipe testing and editing. My first attempts at recipe writing were returned bleeding the red ink of her razor sharp pen. I learned the importance of proofreading and attention to detail, and I am not alone. Tamie Cook, Culinary Director for Alton Brown and former La Varenne *stagiaire*, says, “My experience with Anne Willan at La Varenne was invaluable. Never have I worked so hard and been so rewarded. Anne is driven to perfection like few people I have ever met, and her willingness to open the doors of her operation to someone like myself with very little culinary experience at the time is a testament to her passion for teaching and life-long learning.” This premise is the foundation of Willan’s personal philosophy and permeates her work from her writer’s desk to the stovetop. Anne says, “Learn the scales before you play the music. Cooking is about creativity, but it’s important to acquire discipline first.”

Practicing the essentials and learning the basics are the fundamental building blocks of The La Varenne Way. I once asked Anne what part of her illustrious career made her most proud. Beaming with pride she answered, “Creating La Varenne, where so many people have been through and learned, and have then gone out and done their own things, taking things further and creating their own careers.”

With a statement like that, learning from Anne Willan is obviously an offer you can’t refuse.



Anne Willan in the kitchen with students



Beautiful tarte tatin created by Willan and her students

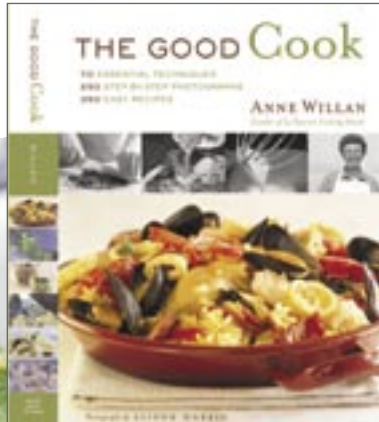
PHOTO: DENISE BINA



PHOTO: ERIN CARR

ANNE WILLAN: THE LA VARENNE WAY

Recipes are reprinted with permission from *The Good Cook* by Anne Willan (Stewart, Tabori, and Chang, 2004).



COVER PHOTO: ALISON HARRIS



Phyllo Pie with Spinach and Ricotta

Filling

two 10-ounce packages frozen, chopped spinach
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 onions, finely chopped
freshly grated nutmeg, to taste
salt and pepper, to taste
1/2 pound ricotta cheese
12 anchovy fillets, finely chopped

For the Filling

Defrost the spinach and coarsely chop it. Heat the olive oil in a large sauté pan. Add the onion and sauté, stirring until soft but not brown, three to four minutes. Stir in the chopped spinach, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Cook, stirring, until very hot and any liquid has evaporated, about two minutes. Remove from the heat, and stir in the ricotta cheese and anchovy. Taste, adjust the seasoning, including nutmeg, and leave the filling to cool.

Phyllo Pie

12 sheets phyllo dough (about 1/2 pound),
more for decorating the pie (optional)
4 tablespoons butter, more if needed
1/3 cup olive oil, more if needed

For the Phyllo Pie

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Melt the butter with the olive oil. Brush the tart pan with melted butter and oil. Lay a damp dish towel on the work surface and unroll the phyllo on it. Brush the top sheet with butter and oil and transfer it to an 11-inch quiche pan or tart pan with removable base. Brush the next sheet with butter and oil and lay it on the first sheet at a slight angle. Continue brushing and layering two more sheets, then cover the rest of the phyllo with a damp towel. Spread half of the filling over the phyllo in the tart pan. Continue adding layers of phyllo and the rest of the filling, finishing with layers of phyllo.

Brush the top of the pie with butter and oil and roll and neaten the edges. If you like, cut another sheet of phyllo into two-inch strips and crumple them lightly into loose round flowers. Arrange them on top of the pie, brush with butter and oil and bake until the pie is lightly puffed and crisp and evenly browned, 50 to 60 minutes. (If it starts to brown too much before the end of cooking, cover it loosely with aluminum foil.) Serve the pie warm or at room temperature.



RECIPE PHOTOGRAPHY BY BELTON CHAPPELL, HAIGWOOD STUDIOS



Salmon with a Crispy Skin and Saffron Butter Sauce

Yield: 4 servings

Striped bass or any fish with a tender skin that sears crisp can be substituted for the salmon.

Saffron Butter Sauce

2 tablespoons dry white wine
2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
2 shallots, very finely chopped
large pinch of saffron threads soaked in
1 tablespoon boiling water
2 tablespoons heavy cream
3/4 cup (1 1/2 sticks) cold butter, cut in small pieces
salt and pepper, to taste

For the Saffron Butter Sauce

Put the white wine, vinegar, shallots, and saffron in a small heavy saucepan. Boil until the liquid is reduced to about two tablespoons. Add the cream, reduce again to two tablespoons, and remove from heat. Add two to three cubes cold butter, whisking vigorously so the butter softens and thickens the sauce. Add more cubes of butter, several at a time, whisking constantly and, if necessary, returning the pan to low heat. When all the butter has been added, the sauce should be just soft enough to pour. Do not let the pan get more than hand-warm. Taste the sauce and adjust the seasoning.

Salmon

1 to 2 salmon fillets, scaled, with skin (about 1 1/2 pounds)
1 to 2 teaspoons olive oil, for the pan

For the Salmon

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. If your frying pan does not fit in the oven, heat a baking sheet. Run your fingers over the flesh and if you feel any bones, pull them out with tweezers. Cut the salmon into four portions and season both sides with salt and pepper. Oil the base of a large heavy frying pan or skillet and heat it until very hot. Add the salmon, skin side down. Fry it over high heat without moving the pieces, two to three minutes, until the skin is crisp. When brown, it will shrink and loosen from the surface of the pan. Turn the pieces skin side up. Transfer them to the oven in the pan or on the heated baking sheet and bake until done to your taste, one to three minutes for medium salmon, four to five minutes for well done. The cooking time will vary with the thickness of the fillets.

Set the salmon skin side up on warm plates with the butter sauce spooned around it, and pass any remaining sauce separately. Serve immediately while the skin is crisp.



Suleiman's Pilaf with Pistachios

Yield: 4 servings

This main course pilaf is excellent with cooked turkey or chicken as well as lamb. Toasted almonds or pine nuts can be substituted for the pistachios. For a vegetarian pilaf, simply leave out the lamb.

6 ounces lean cooked lamb
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 onions, chopped
2 cloves garlic, chopped
1 cup basmati or long-grain rice
1 1/2 cups veal stock or water
1/4 cup currants
1/4 cup dried apricots, chopped
2 tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped
2 teaspoons chopped fresh thyme
1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
salt and pepper, to taste
1/2 cup blanched pistachios
small bunch of dill, chopped
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
1/2 cup plain yogurt

Trim any fat or sinew from the lamb and finely shred it. Heat the oil in a heavy casserole and fry the onions until soft, five to seven minutes. Add the garlic and fry, stirring until fragrant, about one minute. Stir in the rice and cook until it looks translucent and the oil is absorbed. Stir in the stock with the lamb, currants, apricots, tomato, thyme, rosemary, cinnamon, salt and pepper. Cover, bring to a boil and simmer until the liquid is absorbed and the rice is tender, 18 to 20 minutes.

Let the rice stand 10 minutes, then remove the cover and stir in the pistachios, dill, and parsley, using a fork. Add enough yogurt to moisten the pilaf, taste and adjust the seasoning.