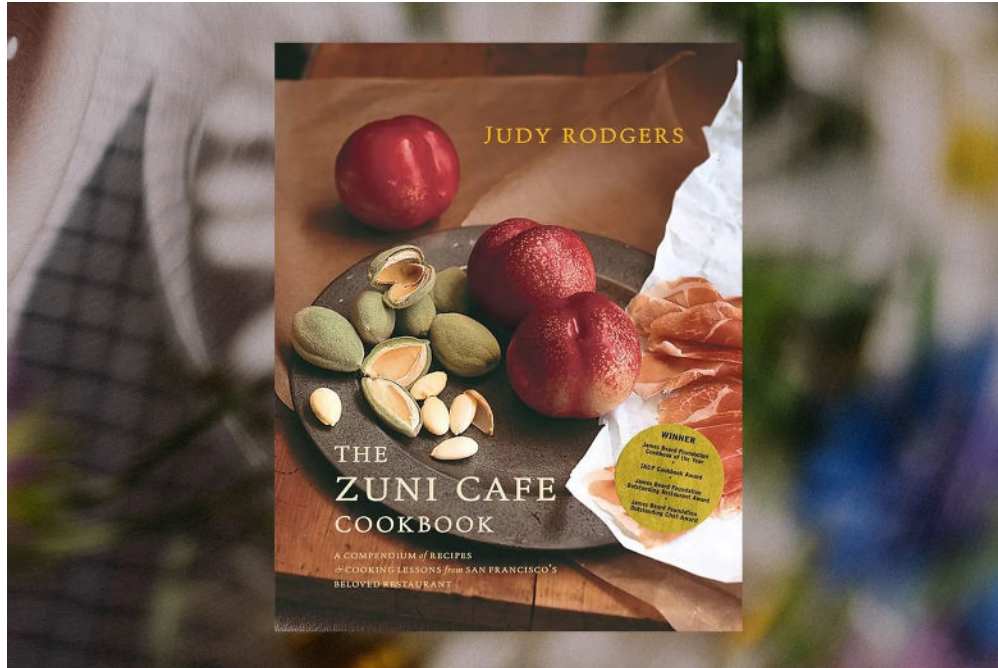


# ‘The Zuni Cafe Cookbook’ Wants You to Pay Attention

Judy Rodgers’s 2002 classic is a 500-page testament to the enduring importance of little details

by [Aimee Levitt](#) | Jan 30, 2024, 10:30am EST



Lille Allen/Eater

Let’s imagine for a second that Judy Rodgers had a perfectly ordinary senior year at Ladue High School, just outside of St. Louis, eating supermarket vegetables and pizza covered in **processed cheese**. Afterward, she would have gone to Stanford to study art history and then to law school and a distinguished career in the foreign service, because Rodgers, in addition to being a planner, was smart and thoughtful about details.

Maybe she would have had one special dinner at Chez Panisse during college and dropped in at other Michelin-starred restaurants during her various postings around the world. But she never would have tasted her own **roast chicken at San Francisco’s Zuni Cafe**, and she never would have written down the recipe in 4 1/2 meticulously detailed pages. And innumerable home cooks across the English-speaking world, myself included, never would have learned to make their own perfectly roasted chickens, and the world, in this one small but important way, would be a sadder place.

Fortunately for all of us, that’s not what happened, except for the parts about Stanford and the dinner at Chez Panisse.

Instead, Judy Rodgers spent the 1973-74 school year in Roanne, France, a small town near Lyon, thanks to the efforts of a neighbor who traveled there frequently on business and had befriended the family who owned the local hotel. The neighbor arranged a student exchange between Rodgers and the hotel owners' teenage daughter. Maybe Rodgers knew before she left for France that the restaurant attached to the hotel, **Les Frères Troisgros** (later Les Troisgros), had three Michelin stars, but she'd grown up in an atmosphere indifferent to food and didn't realize what this actually meant until she arrived.

Her first meal in France was a ham sandwich on a stale baguette, consumed at a rest stop during her seven-hour drive from Paris to Roanne with Jean Troisgros. In order to defend the honor of French cuisine, Jean went into the kitchen upon their 4 a.m. arrival and made her a *good* ham sandwich. It was, Rodgers wrote in the introduction to *The Zuni Cafe Cookbook*, her 2002 **masterpiece**, "on chewy, day-old *pain de campagne* [with] a spoonful of very spicy mustard, tarragon-laced cornichons, and a few sweet, tender crayfish as an hors d'oeuvre." It was a simpler meal than Julia Child's sole meunière in Le Havre, but it had the same effect: It taught Rodgers how to eat.

Les Frères Troisgros was known for the simplicity and purity of its cooking and its unpretentious atmosphere. That year, Rodgers spent every spare minute in Jean and Pierre Troisgros' kitchen, except for when she visited the home kitchen of their sister, Madeleine Troisgros Serraille, Tata Madeleine, who also knew how to prepare a perfect meal. The Troisgroses believed, Rodgers wrote, that everyday food ought to be taken as seriously as haute cuisine, "just as well prepared, and just as celebrated."

Rodgers, whose previous culinary experience had been working at Dairy Queen, paid close attention and took meticulous notes. No one let her cook anything, except for a single disastrous attempt at an American carrot cake. But they made sure she tasted everything, at every stage of preparation. They showed her how even fresh ingredients taste different from day to day and why having a sharp knife and the right-sized pan matters.

When Rodgers returned to St. Louis, she decided to show off these lessons to her family. "I go to the supermarket, idiot that I was, to buy the ingredients for a dish of Jean's, a bean salad with creme fraiche," she told the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* in 2003. "And guess what? The green beans were as thick as the ropes on a cabin cruiser and the cream was hyper-pasteurized. It was horrible. Of course my family said, 'Oh, this is wonderful,' but I knew it wasn't good; it tasted tough and plastic."

It was an important lesson: You can write down quantities, temperatures, and everything else that goes into a recipe, but it won't make a bit of difference unless you've got good raw ingredients. The Troisgroses had them as a matter of course. Most Americans did not.

Jean Troisgros had told Rodgers that good cooking wasn't art, but *artisanal*. "His distinction," she wrote in *Zuni*, "acknowledges the necessity of cooking, and honors the collaborative genius of community in coming up with good cooking."

This also became the basis of Rodgers's own culinary philosophy — although she almost didn't give herself the chance to develop it. At 17, she initially ruled out a career in the kitchen because she was already too old to train in the traditional French style. But then, as a student at Stanford in 1977, she wound up at Chez Panisse. One of the originators of what came to be known as California cuisine, the Berkeley restaurant owed something to the formal restaurant cooking of the Troisgros brothers, but even more to great home cooks like Tata Madeleine. It was, in other words, the very best place Rodgers could have ended up.

A friend of Rodgers worked there and, the night she came to dinner, introduced her to the owner, Alice Waters, a devout Francophile. Upon hearing Rodgers had spent a year with the Troisgros and had 100 pages of notes, Waters demanded to hear *everything*. In return, Rodgers asked if she could hang out in the kitchen sometime; the restaurant's spirit and generosity reminded her of Les Troisgros. Instead, Waters invited her to help cook lunch on Saturdays.

And that was that. Well, there were also several very formative years of traveling in Italy, an apprenticeship in southwest France, and a stint with [Marion Cunningham](#) at the Union Hotel in Benicia, just north of San Francisco. That was how Rodgers learned to put the theories she'd learned from the Troisgroses into practice and understand the mechanics of running a restaurant kitchen. But she already knew what she wanted her restaurant to be, and when she became the chef at the Zuni Cafe in 1987, the owners, Billy West and Vince Calcagno, let her build it.

Located on Market Street, Zuni opened in 1979 as a vaguely Southwest-themed restaurant that became an all-day neighborhood hangout known for its made-to-order Caesar salad and guacamole and the Weber grill on its sidewalk. It also had what writer John Birdsall [described](#) as "waiters with an uninhibited queer presence" who welcomed the LGBTQ community, City Hall politicians, and Elizabeth David.

Rodgers kept the servers and the all-day menu, including the Caesar, but convinced West and Calcagno to ditch the Weber for a wood-fired brick oven. When the health department confiscated the molcajete, putting an end to the guacamole, Rodgers steered the menu in an Italian direction.

Under Rodgers, the Zuni Cafe, *Los Angeles Times* food journalist Russ Parsons wrote many years later, was "the fountainhead of California cuisine," most succinctly summed up as, "Get good ingredients and get out of their way," which is not to say it's easy to cook that way. Rodgers's unofficial motto was "Stop, think, there must be a harder way." (It appears in *The Zuni Cafe Cookbook's* recipe for house-cured salt cod, and reportedly on a sign posted inside the restaurant.)

And then, one fateful day, when she was feeling overworked and under the weather and couldn't think of anything better, Rodgers suggested serving **roast chicken** for dinner, over a warm Italian-style bread salad. On a whim, she salted the chicken a few hours before putting it in the wood-fired oven, reasoning that the dry brine had made the fried chicken at the Union Hotel more succulent, so why shouldn't it work on roasted chicken? To say that people liked it was an understatement. The cafe still roasts 60 chickens every day.

It was probably inevitable that there would be a *Zuni Cafe Cookbook*, but not because Rodgers was a food world celebrity. She didn't do TV. While she eventually took over Zuni after West died of complications from AIDS in 1994, she never opened another restaurant. Her life outside the kitchen remained private. She disliked the title "chef" and though she was an exacting boss — one former cook, Kathleen Daelemans, wrote in **her own cookbook** that Rodgers's palate was so well developed that she could tell if someone had touched raw garlic before tossing a salad — she was more of a teacher than a general. Even after chefs across the country **borrowed** her dry-brining technique for poultry, she didn't consider herself much of an innovator. Instead, she saw herself as a conduit for cooking traditions she absorbed in Europe. "I'm not very important," she **told Epicurious** in a video. "It's the ingredients." There was no false humility when she said this; she could barely bring herself to look at the camera.

But Zuni was a great subject for a cookbook, first because California cuisine was so rooted in home cooking, but also because it was an expression of Rodgers's method of cooking the same foods over and over again using the best ingredients, tasting frequently, and *paying attention*. Weighing in at 500 pages, the book was written without a ghostwriter (a fact marveled over by reviewers). Over the years, Rodgers had amassed a vast store of knowledge — agriculture, chemistry, taste memory, technique — that she knew how to deploy to make food taste its absolute best, and she knew how to pass it on to others.

You might call the Zuni way of cooking a *practice*, like daily yoga, something that changes your way of being in the world. Dinner prep begins not with a recipe, but what you happen to find at the market that day. But even if you're, say, stuck in the Midwest in the dead of winter, you can still make the best of pantry ingredients. You know what to do to make your morning coffee taste the way you like it, Rodgers points out, and you can tell by looking at the color and taking an experimental sip if you got it right. Why should an omelet or a roast chicken be any different?

Okay, but it doesn't require four pages of instructions to dump the right quantity of cream and sugar into a cup of coffee. How on earth is there so much to say about two very basic dishes?

The reason these recipes are so long is because they go into extreme detail: what the dish should look like, what it should sound like, and what to do if it doesn't look or sound the way it should. Rodgers, bless her, also has two supplemental essays for the chicken recipe, one on salting and one on roasting. "Over the years," she writes in the former, "I have tracked the taste and texture of every type of meat, bird, and fish I



have cooked to see which ones benefit from an early sprinkle of salt, or a bath of brine.”

If you are the sort of person who needs to know *why* you have to do all these extra things (besides “Stop, think, there must be a harder way”), it’s nice to know how they all work. For instance, you salt the chicken and let it sit for two days because the extra time allows the seasoning to disperse through the bird and the salt itself, and in Rodgers’ words, “promotes juiciness and improves texture.” Omelets need to be cooked in a very hot pan because heat makes the water in the eggs evaporate. Evaporated water forms steam. By tossing and rolling the scrambled whites and yolks, you trap the steam, and that is how you get a fluffy omelet.

But even if you don’t care about the whys, following the instructions closely will give you a delicious, if not always beautiful, specimen. The amount of care Rodgers must have put into these recipes in order to make sure she didn’t miss a damned thing is astonishing. They *work*.

“My wife — a far better and more dedicated cook than I am — made [the sea bass with leeks, potatoes, and thyme] on a whim one night,” the *New York Times* critic Dwight Garner wrote in [his review](#) of the cookbook, “and after taking one bite we simply dropped our forks and stared at each other.”

That’s what I did with the first Zuni-style chicken I roasted 15 years ago (and because it was the 21st century, I also commemorated it on social media and kept the picture on my phone for anyone who cared to see it). More recently, I did it with the buttermilk mashed potatoes and chocolate pot de creme. I’m still working on Tata Madeleine’s omelet with mustard croutons. Although I’ve made it three times in two weeks and it always tastes good, I haven’t gotten the knack of rolling it over in the pan, and the results have been ugly (though fluffy!). But I’m getting closer. I’ve learned to heat the butter properly and to listen for the eggs to make what Rodgers describes as a pleasant “cluck” (somewhere, I think, between a sizzle and a splatter) when they land in the pan.

Rodgers [died](#) a little more than 10 years ago, at the end of 2013. Despite her multiple James Beard awards (both for Zuni the cafe and *Zuni* the book), the flood of obituaries and tributes was the most public acclaim she ever received. It seems unfair that she’s not better known, even if she was happiest in the kitchen instead of in front of a camera. But if we all start salting our chickens two days before we roast them, I can’t imagine a better way to honor her memory.

*Aimee Levitt is a freelance writer in Chicago. Read more of her work at [aimeelevitt.com](http://aimeelevitt.com).*