

When Julia Reed died in August, the South lost one of its richest voices and most talented chroniclers. Author of numerous books and magazine articles, Julia's subject matter ranged from presidential politics to pimento cheese, always peppered with her trademark wit, razor-sharp analysis, and mastery at bringing the reader along for the ride with a good story. She was the life of any party but loved nothing more than giving one, including a Christmas luncheon she and Keith Meacham co-hosted for the Garden Club of Nashville in Keith's home last December. Here, Keith, her dear friend and business partner in the online shop Reed Smythe & Company, shares memories and a few of the entertaining lessons she learned from Julia over the years.

Remembering Julia

I DON'T THINK THERE WAS EVER A TIME WHEN I wasn't aware that Julia Reed was in this world. We're both from the small town of Greenville, Mississippi, and our families were friends, although she and I were 10 years apart and didn't know each other well back then. Julia loved to joke that on Christmas Eve I was upstairs having milk and cookies in the nursery, while she was downstairs sipping Champagne at the grown-up party. We didn't truly become friends until the mid-1990s, when we were both living in New York and my husband, Jon, became her editor at *Newsweek*.

During that time, Julia and I began co-hosting parties and bringing a little bit of the Mississippi Delta to Manhattan. We thought it was so funny that people would go crazy over food that would have been part of any gathering back home, like Sister Schubert's rolls and beef tenderloin with horseradish or cheese straws and sausage balls. Little did folks realize that those tasty bites were nothing more than Bisquick, cheddar cheese, and Jimmy Dean sausage, but when it all comes together, it's a fabulous combination.

We'd cook out of the tiny kitchens in either her apartment or mine, and we enjoyed the planning and preparation as much as the actual event. Whipping out our legal pads, we'd make endless lists and phone back and forth, plotting where to procure the crabmeat or what to serve with the aspic this time. Jon would kind of roll his eyes and say, "Here we go again, the Crabmeat Caucus in action." The nickname stuck.

Jon has certainly benefited from the efforts of the Crabmeat Caucus, not least of all when Julia and I hosted his 30th birthday party at the grand but small apartment Julia had on East 78th Street. There was this hilarious high-low mix of people,



everyone from Manolo Blahnik, André Leon Talley, and Katharine Graham to some renegade Mississippians who happened to be in town. One of the things Julia taught me that I treasure most is that entertaining is all about having faith that your guests, no matter who they are, are going to have a much better time if you mix it up. Everyone doesn't have to be famous or fancy. People are genuinely



THIS SPREAD: Keith Meacham and Julia Reed in a rare moment of pre-party quiet before a holiday luncheon in Keith's Nashville home. The entry wallpaper inspired the palette for lush floral designs by Sherry and Sarah Smythe of Lagniappe, who also happen to be Keith's stepmother and sister. Interior design by Brockschmidt & Coleman.

By **KEITH MEACHAM** as told to Karen Carroll • Photography by **LAUREY W. GLENN**



“The greatest lesson I learned from Julia is that cooking and setting a beautiful table are really the purest expressions of friendship and love.”

—KEITH MEACHAM

BELOW: Ellie, the Meachams' Springer Spaniel, awaits guests. RIGHT: In the kitchen, small bouquets and myrtle topiaries were placed in votives, wine rinsers, and a gentleman's ice pail from Keith and Julia's online shop, Reed Smythe & Company. OPPOSITE: The centerpiece urn was packed with a vibrant mix of roses, ranunculus, tulips, cedar, Queen Anne's lace, and silvery-blue eucalyptus pods for a gathered-from-the-garden effect.



grateful to be invited, and it makes for a much more interesting evening if there is an element of the unknown.

Julia collected people wherever she went. She had her foot in many different arenas—politics, design, food, fashion, culture—and the high-profile personalities she met along the way often ended up around her dinner table. But she always remained unpretentious. She knew that guests appreciate when you've made an effort, and it doesn't have to happen in a huge house or with the finest silver, although she definitely had plenty of that. It's about the people, the deliciousness of the food, and a friendly atmosphere, rather than about pretension or even perfection.

And believe me, there were plenty of mishaps, but we reveled in the chaos. One New Year's Eve, we co-hosted a dinner in her New Orleans apartment on Bourbon Street. As was often the case, I was acting as her sous chef and making some blinis to serve with caviar. I mistakenly used sour cream rather than heavy cream, and they puffed up like footballs—a total screwup, but we

laughed for an hour as we were getting dressed for the evening, and they actually tasted delicious.

At another party in my apartment, a salon-like affair with Jon interviewing Arthur Schlesinger and Tom Brokaw for the Council on Foreign Relations, the caterers set up a round table and neglected to lock the legs. The table crashed in the middle of the discussion, sending spinach, Madeleine and beef tenderloin flying all over the dining room. Julia and I ran to the kitchen, opened another bottle of Champagne, and got to work putting fresh food on the table, assuring the guests that this sort of thing happened all the time. Julia's Madeira School motto, "Function in disaster, finish in style," was fitting for a lot of the entertaining we did in those days.

Julia left New York for the South a few years before we did, but when Jon and I decided to move our family to Nashville, we bought a house down the street from the one her mother was born in, where Julia frequently visited her grandparents as a child. We were thrilled when our new house became Julia's home away from home, and we continued to find all sorts of reasons to plan parties and menus together, including a couple for her cookbooks.

Last December we gave a holiday luncheon for Julia's cousin, Frannie Corzine, to celebrate her leadership of the Garden Club of Nashville. While we would often arrange centerpieces and flowers ourselves, we knew for this time of year and this crowd we needed to



JULIA REED'S MILK PUNCH

"I never serve eggnog—the one holiday culinary tradition I have not been able to get behind—but I do make milk punch. With its frothy top and not-so-jaundiced color, a milk punch is prettier to look at than eggnog and is not nearly as rich and cloying, saved from that state by an effective combination of bourbon and brandy. They are especially good before a holiday lunch with, naturally, cheese straws and pecans. By evening, everyone wants a Santa hat."

—From *Horn Biscuits, Hostess Gowns and Other Southern Specialties* (St. Martin's Press, 2008)

For the recipe, visit flowermag.com.



step up our game. Fortunately my stepmother and sister, Sherry and Sarah Smythe, own an event and floral business in Greenville called Lagniappe, and they have such talent for incorporating beautiful branches and other things from the yard into more formal arrangements, even using fruits and vegetables from the kitchen. It all felt organic and made the day more special. Pulling the party together became a family affair.

As usual, there was a bit of a mad rush behind the scenes. Although generally we don't have alcohol at Garden Club functions, Julia not surprisingly put the kibosh on that plan. We mixed up some milk punch around 10 o'clock and everyone consumed their fair share while we prepared lunch. The guests arrived at noon and no one else turned it away either. I think it's safe to say it was a very festive meeting of the ladies.

One of the sweetest things about the day was seeing so many generations together—women that Julia's mother had grown up with; women that Julia had been friends with as a child; women they had handed on to me as new friends for my life in Nashville, whose daughters are now growing up with my daughters. Julia believed the best recipe for a party is the right combination of people, and this one seemed like everything had come full circle.

The greatest lesson I learned from Julia over the years is that cooking and setting a beautiful table are really the purest expressions of friendship and love. Shortly before she died, Julia wrote me a note telling me I was like the sister she'd never had, and although for a long time she may have been the teacher and I the student, how much she had learned from me, too. It was the most precious gift Julia could have given me. ❄️



THIS SPREAD: Sherry and Sarah drew from Keith's collection of antique porcelain for several of the arrangements. "Keith and Julia have always given us creative freedom to make whatever we're feeling in the moment," says Sarah. "We were feeling especially good that day because we had all of our favorite people around us." Guests mingled by a fireplace draped in a garland accented with pomegranates, apples, and persimmon branches. The hostesses served a festive milk punch in emerald-green goblets from Reed Smythe & Company.

