

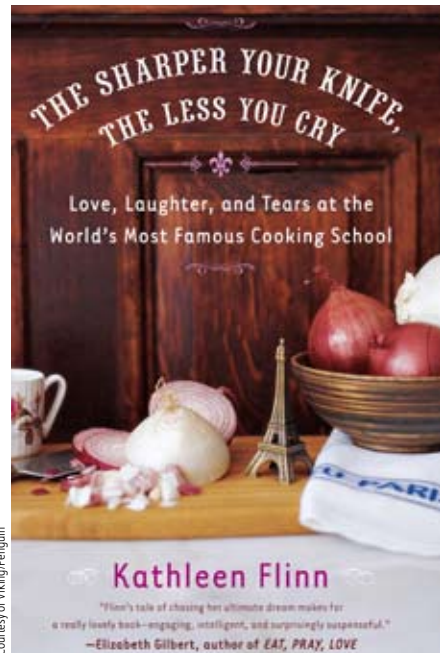


Kathleen Flinn's book relays her experiences at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris.



Tuna ceviche with puff pastry, one of Kathleen's recipes found in her book. Select recipes also are available at AAA.com/GoingPlaces.

Peter Waweru



Roger Steen

Courtesy of Viking/Penguin

THE SHARPER YOUR KNIFE, *the Less You Cry*

LOVE, LAUGHTER AND TEARS
AT THE WORLDS MOST FAMOUS COOKING SCHOOL

At age 36, Kathleen Flinn returned from vacation to find her corporate role had been eliminated. Flinn cleared out her savings and moved to Paris to pursue a lifelong dream—a diploma from the famed Le Cordon Bleu cooking school. *The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry* is the story of Flinn's transformation as she moves through the school's intense culinary program. Flinn interweaves more than two dozen recipes with a unique look inside Le Cordon Bleu amid battles with demanding chefs, competitive classmates and her "wretchedly inadequate" French.

By Kathleen Flinn

Some people believe that Julia Child dropped a whole chicken on a floor while filming *The French Chef*. In truth, she only dropped some potatoes she was trying to flip in a pan. But how I wish it were true. Then, I wouldn't feel so bad about the duck.

Everything is going well with *canette rôtie aux navets*, roast duckling with turnips. Aiming below the knee joint, with a whack I take off the webbed feet in one swift blow. Chef Bouveret whistles as he walks around the room and collects the feet in a large stainless steel bowl to toss in the bin; the sight looks like a host of Daffy Ducks were bumped

off and stored, feet side up. I pick off the excess feathers, cut out the wishbone and truss it up into a neat package. Then I follow Le Cordon Bleu's precise roasting instructions.

La cannette goes on its side in a hot oven for 10 minutes. Then the duckling is turned to the other side for 10 minutes. After I add *mirepoix*, it is turned on its back for 15 minutes to finish. I'm dubious about the short cooking time until I see the duckling, brown and tender, its skin just ever so taut. I rest the pan on the open oven door as I insert my roasting fork into the cavity to turn it over for the last minutes of cooking.

Then my wrist hits the edge of the hot pan. My duck flies from the roasting fork into the air and drops onto the floor. It keeps rolling, like a succulent little football, to the edge of Anna-Claire's stove.

Now there is one thing that's true about Julia Child. She said that you should never confess to mistakes that were not witnessed by others.

"Remember, you're alone in the kitchen," she would say. "You must stand by your convictions and just pretend that was the way it was supposed to turn out."

Of course, here I am not alone. There are nine other students, plus the nosy Algerian dishwasher in the kitchen restocking pans. Mercifully, Chef Bouveret is out of the room. Anna-Claire eyes the duck with a look of horror for a good reason. The *sous-sol* sent up only five ducks today. We're sharing this one.

I put a finger to my lips to Anna-Clare and the dishwasher. Without a word, I scoop up the hot duck with my side towel and toss it into the pan, shove it in the oven and slam the door. I stand up, and bump into L.P. standing in front of me. Her face says it all. She doesn't approve, and I sense a lecture. But then, Chef Bouveret returns to the room, whistling and triumphant, having found turnips that had been missing from the class basket.

"Look, look," he says, holding up the bowl. I think these are the only English words he knows.

I proceed with my recipe and plate as usual. By now, whispered word has spread in the kitchen of the dropped duck. The dishwasher peeks around the corner. Will I let the chef taste the contaminated duck?

Chef tries the sauce. Good consistency, he says in French, but it needs more salt. My vegetable cuts earn a "*bien*." He tastes a tender turnip. His hand, clutching a small plastic spoon, hovers above the duck breast meat, sliced thin and fanned out on the plate. Instead of taking a bite, he directs my attention to the coloring of the meat.

"Look, look, *ici. Pas assez cuit*," Chef says. It needed two more minutes of cooking on one side. But otherwise, it's "*bon travail*," nice work, "Meeze Fleen."

In the locker room, Anna-Clare and I debate the duck. Didn't some researcher find that the "five-second" rule wasn't a myth? That you could reclaim food as long as it had been dropped on a clean floor? Surely, our duck wasn't on the floor that long.



Photo: Vivavatu

The mustard chicken recipe is perfect for a get together with friends.

Still, when I take my half home, I tell husband Mike, "Just don't eat the skin." He asks why. "I'll tell you later."



Such intrigue over a duck is nothing. We are learning that it's best to keep the chefs happy, even if it requires the occasional bit of clandestine work.

The following day, we are to audit three pieces of beef to specific doneness. We are instructed to make one *bleu* (bloody), one rare (a little less bloody) and one what the French call *à point* (sort of medium rare.) The chefs have taught us a trick to determining the doneness of meat using our hands. It goes like this: Relaxing the hand, hold thumb to forefinger, as if making the O.K. symbol, and touch the soft pad under the thumb with your other forefinger. That's *bleu*. Touch the thumb to the middle finger, the bump gets a bit taut. That's the way that rare meat feels. The thumb to ring finger equals medium rare.

The thumb to pinky? That's well done, or "*Américain*," as one chef says.

At the other end of the table, there's some shuffling when Chef Bertrand leaves the room. Ramona has overcooked all her steaks and utterly destroyed her béarnaise sauce. Students quickly converge to assemble an adequate plate, chipping in a piece of meat, some sauce and some warm potatoes *Pont Neuf*, which are essentially large French fries. Chef returns, looks over her plate, deems the sauce too salty and leaves. A minute later, he returns, tastes the same sauce presented by L.P. and declares it perfect. *C'est la vie*.



Chef Bouveret returns early from a trip to Costa Rica and spends a few days just observing classes. He's not happy.

"You do not taste as you cook, so you ended up with bland or over-seasoned consommés. Your puff pastry was nothing special," he lambastes us via Anne the translator. We are not careful enough with cooking our meats, and some of us did not follow instructions for cooking the duck. "Some of you are taking too much liberty. You are to reproduce what



Rounds of French cheese.

Kathleen Flinn

Kathleen Flinn is an award-winning journalist whose work has appeared in more than three dozen publications, including the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Men's Fitness* and *USA Weekend*. She is the author of *The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry*, a memoir with recipes about her experiences at the famed Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris (Viking/Penguin, October 2007). She worked as a staffer at the Sarasota (FL) *Herald-Tribune* and *Adweek* and was founding editor of *Internet Underground*, one of the first print magazines about the Internet. From there, she was hired as the first restaurant editor for *Sidewalk.com*, Microsoft's series of city guides that later merged with *Citysearch*, and served as the head of editorial for *MSN.co.uk* in the United Kingdom, based in London. She lives in Seattle, but spends as much time as she can in Paris.

The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry: Love, Laughter and Tears at the World's Most Famous Cooking School is available at most major bookstores. AAA members save 5% in addition to online pricing discounts at AAA.com/BarnesandNoble.

you see in the demonstrations, consistently and faithfully.”

Later that day, chefs conduct our first uniform check. Diego makes up a complicated lie about why he hasn't yet purchased professional chef shoes. He's given 48 hours to comply. Kim's attire is usually spotless, but she's gotten lazy with house guests, and today wears a dirty apron. Chef Savard expels her from the kitchen. She clandestinely purchases a new one from the front desk so that she can continue class.

Everyone seems to struggle to “turn” vegetables, a garnishing technique that transforms an otherwise unremarkable vegetable into a six-or-seven-sided torpedo shape. Starting with large potatoes, I keep turning, trying to get the right shape, whittling it down to a half-inch, clumsy cylinder. Chef Savard is unimpressed when I present mine along with some pork medallions soaked in a mustard cream sauce.

“Everything is OK, but these vegetables are not acceptable, although I can see you know that, Meeze Fleen.”

So on my way home, I stop by Monoprix and buy four pounds of carrots and five pounds of potatoes. I buy flour, fresh yeast and butter. Mike comes downstairs to help me lug them up the six flights. I start puff pastry, making two turns and let it rest overnight. Then, I sit for four hours practicing turning until my hands are almost too sore to move. Mike practices a few, too. Irritatingly, his are almost perfect.

Everyone seems under fire from the chefs. We can do nothing right to please them. They have been easy on us for weeks. But the mood has changed among them, and among us. It's time to find out who is serious. **GP**

Reprinted by arrangement with Viking, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., from *THE SHARPER YOUR KNIFE, THE LESS YOU CRY* by Kathleen Flinn. Copyright © Kathleen Flinn, 2007

Mushroom crusted steak with red wine sauce is a favorite recipe in the book.



Peter Waweru

A Cordon Bleu Culinary Tour of Paris

Hosted by author Kathleen Flinn

Sample this rare opportunity to experience the culinary capital of the world—with Kathleen Flinn, author of the acclaimed food memoir *The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry*. Designed with the author, the tour provides a delicious opportunity to personally savor scenes from the book. You'll tour a street market guided by a French chef and attend a demonstration class at the famous school itself. And you'll rendezvous for dinner with the author in the heart of Paris.

AAA Exclusive Tour Highlights:

- Champagne reception
- Private city tour with Kathleen Flinn
- Street-market tour, cooking demonstration with Le Cordon Bleu chef
- Winetasting dinner in the Marais district
- Tour of Rungis, the world's largest wholesale market
- Day trip to medieval Rouen, the capital of Normandy
- Dinner at Moulin Rouge
- Guided panoramic tour includes the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, Arc de Triomphe and Champs Elysées

Itinerary

Day 1 / Depart USA

Depart on your overnight flight to Paris.

Day 2 / Arrive Paris

You're welcomed to the beautiful Hotel Victoria Palace. Situated on the city's Left Bank between Saint-Germain-des-Prés and Montparnasse neighborhoods, it's an ideal location for exploring the city. This evening enjoy a Champagne reception, welcome dinner with the author, plus a reading and signing at the La Coupole, one of the oldest brasseries of Paris.

Day 3 / Walking Tour with Kathleen Flinn

After breakfast, enjoy, a personalized and comprehensive walking tour of the Les Halles district, visiting wine and gourmet stores, touring inside the medieval Cathedral Saint-Eustache and ending the morning walk at a famous cookware store.

Day 4 / Le Cordon Bleu "Le Marché de Paris"

A Le Cordon Bleu chef guides you through a beautiful outdoor Parisian market to discover the secrets of selecting quality produce and fresh seasonal ingredients. Then it's back to the school for a cooking demonstration. Afterwards, Kathleen provides a personalized tour of the school. This evening, enjoy dinner and a show at the famous Moulin Rouge.

Day 5 / Day trip to Rouen

Experience a full-day guided tour to Rouen. (This Normandy town was where Julia Child ate her first meal in France, enflaming a lifetime passion for French food.)

Day 6 / Rungis

Rungis is the largest wholesale market in the world. Your guided tour allows you to view unbelievable quantities of meat, cheese, vegetables and flowers. Then you'll lunch in one of the brasseries with the traders. In the evening, it's on to the cellier Saint Paul, a beautiful restaurant set in the city's Marais district, to savor French wine and a multi-course French bistro dinner.

Day 7 / Depart for home

Bid farewell to new friends.

Cordon Bleu Culinary Tour Hosted by author Kathleen Flinn

2008 Departures
May 6, 13, 20 & 27

Travelers receive a personally signed book and exclusive pre-trip guide by the author.

From \$4539*

Call or visit your local AAA Travel office for more information.

*Per person, plus airfare