

A Life Of Creating And Cooking

An Interview with Ellen Wright



EDITORS' NOTE *Ellen Wright is the founder of the design firm EMW Interiors and is the author of Bridgehampton Weekends and Around the Table. She has been featured on Today, Larry King Live, and Home & Garden Television, among many others.*

Will you discuss your career journey?

The common thread through all my work is creativity, whether it's in painting, ceramics, cooking or interior design. I started very young. At age six, my mother took me to her art classes where I sat next to her and had the chance to do a lot of painting, which came naturally to me. I think that I inherited her talent. At age 17, I started at Mills College in Oakland, California where I majored in painting and drawing. I was surrounded at Mills with people who were talented, determined, and disciplined. After college, I did ceramics, then got married and had

children, which made it difficult to continue going to a studio, but only increased my love of art and design.

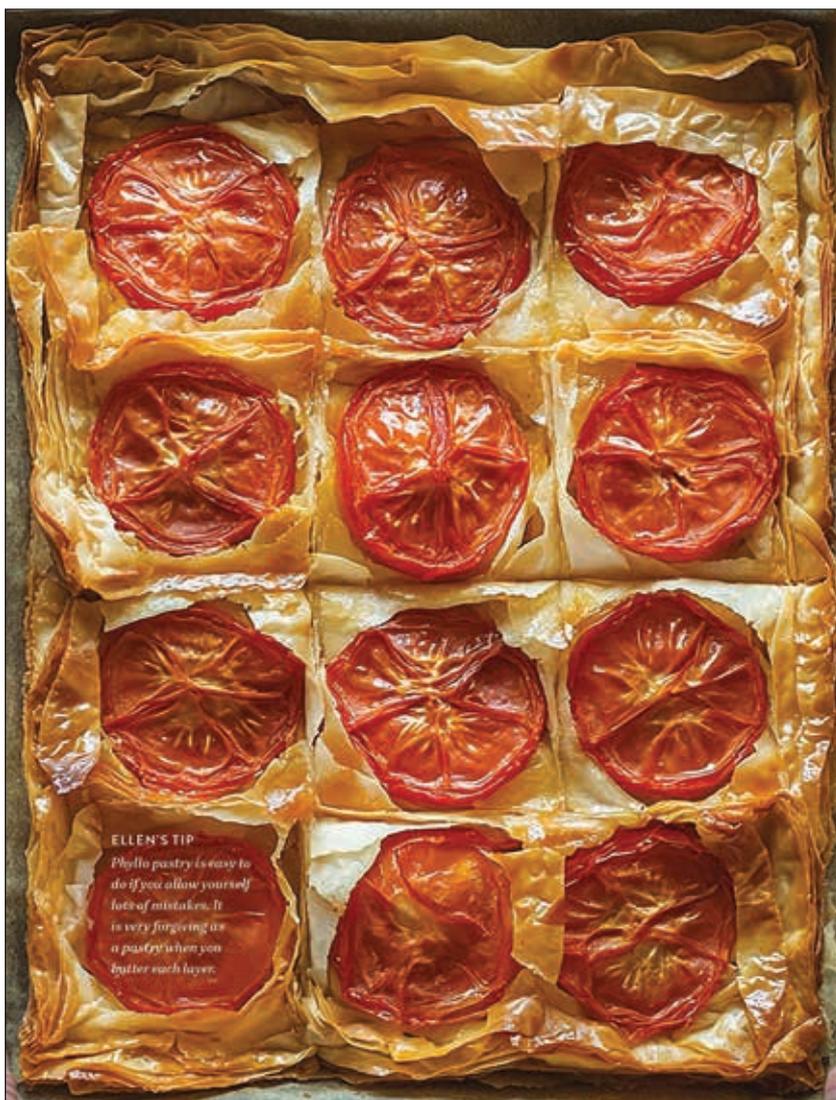
I became interested in cooking when I was about 20 and studied with Julia Child, who I met in San Francisco. I started to host dinners and enjoyed bringing interesting people together and cooking for them. I also became an interior decorator, something that I have stayed with for the past 45 years. I was a decorator for some very famous people, and I had a wonderful time doing it.

What led to your interest in writing cookbooks?

After I met James Beard and worked with him for a few years, I decided to do my own cookbooks. I did four in five years from 2000 to 2005. My latest book, my fifth, *Best of The Best*, is all about simple food. To lay the groundwork, I sent 22 menus to my son, who's a movie director, and asked him to put it together. He took the 22 menus, went



Baked Salmon A La Julia



Tomato Phyllo Pie

“I like to cook dishes that are accessible to most people...”

to our apartment in New York, found photographs of me from over a 60-year span, which was the time that I had been cooking, and put the book together. It is now being sold on Amazon, and it has turned out to be my favorite cookbook because it has all my most cherished recipes in it – ones that people love and ask for over and over again.

How do you describe your cooking?

I like to cook dishes that are accessible to most people – the kind you would be comfortable making at home whether to entertain guests or just for your family. There are many people who can be intimidated by cooking, but they shouldn't be. It is all about practicing and learning. When you make a mistake, it's not the end of the world – that's the number one thing you always need to remember. You need to understand why you made your mistake and decide whether you have to throw it out and start again, or whether you can create something different. For example, let's say you make an apple pie and it falls apart. Just put a scoop of it in a pretty wine glass and top it with some whipped cream and you have a lovely apple cobbler. I've always put "Ellen's tips" like that in my cookbooks to provide ideas on how to adapt and improvise when needed. You just have to keep on trucking as the saying goes, which in a way is my life story.

What has made philanthropic work so important to you?

I was brought up in a family that was philanthropic. It started with my grandfather, who came to the U.S. from Russia with only a quarter in his pocket. He eventually started a company called Stride Rite selling kids shoes, and it became very big in the children's shoe business. He never forgot the help that he got from others along the way and always wanted to give back. He and his wife gave to Beth Israel Hospital, to the Jewish temple, and to various organizations that they believed in.

And so I grew up surrounded by people who made a difference, and it has had a big impact on my life. Among other activities, I became a board member of the Hospital for Special Surgery about 18 years ago. I love being involved there because HSS is doing amazing research on the advancement of musculoskeletal health, and it has inspired me to take action on my own. At one point, I heard a young man of 17 complaining about how his "moon" boots were getting too small for his early-arthritic feet. He had to have his boots made specially for those very deformed feet, but he was told that it was too early for a new pair and that he would have to wait six months for insurance to cover the new pair. This spurred me into action. I raised money for a fund to support any kid who needed a prosthesis right away, and that fund is still in operation at the hospital.

Do you ever think about slowing down?

I think you can't help but slow down a little bit as you get older. For example, with this latest cookbook, I didn't want to travel to 26 cities the way I used to when I was promoting a new book. Having said that though, let me add that you are never too old to keep asking people to come to dinner. I will always want to bring interesting people together around good food and good cooking and to celebrate the importance of human relationships. That is what life is all about. ●



Jessy's Chocolate Cake