

Interview with Julia Turshen

[00:00:11] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking to Julia Turshen about her latest cookbook, SIMPLY JULIA, which is out now from HarperWave. You can find a complete transcript of our conversation over on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:37] **Kendra** So if you talk to me for any length of time, you'll realize that when I'm not spending time working in the book world or, you know, spending time with Dylan, my corgi, I am cooking or watching food TV or looking up cookbooks that I want to buy and adding to my wish list. I love cooking. And this really comes from having a very restricted diet from the time I was a teenager. And so I realized that if I wanted to eat quality food, I had to learn to make it myself. And because of those dietary restrictions, not a lot of people knew how to cook in a way where I could eat that food. And so that's why it was important for me to learn how to cook. And so when I open up a cookbook now, I go into it understanding that I probably won't be able to eat most of the recipes. Now, of course, I still love reading these cookbooks, but I'm always having to adapt recipes so that I can eat them.

[00:01:36] **Kendra** But when I picked up Julia Turshen's cookbook, SIMPLY JULIA, I opened it up, and I started looking through the recipes. And I was like, Oh, I can . . . I could eat that one. And the next one, Oh, I could eat that too. And oh look, she mentions a substitution for people who are gluten free; I could eat this one too. And I realized the majority of the recipes in the book, I could eat—or they were easily adaptable, which was also mentioned in the text, so I could eat them. And in the introduction of the cookbook, Julia talks about how her wife was diagnosed with diabetes. And so she wanted to create these recipes so that she and her wife could eat these really comforting recipes, but were also very conscious of health. So in this interview, we really dig into what does it mean when we say healthy eating? What is healthy eating? We talk about body image and so many other things, including my obsession with lentils and Julia's obsession with beans. I mean, it's a beautiful interview. And I was so delighted to be able to have this joy of food and to be able to have this very joyful conversation about food and how much we love it and our different experiences with it. For me, personally, being able to actually talk to a cookbook author who's created recipes that are accessible to me, a disabled person with a very particular diet was so meaningful. So I could not be more grateful that Julia joined me for this conversation.

[00:03:06] **Kendra** So a little bit about her before we jump in to our conversation. Julia Turshen is the best-selling author of NOW AND AGAIN, FEED THE RESISTANCE, and SMALL VICTORIES. She also hosts the AICP-nominated podcast Keep Calm and Cook On. She has coauthored numerous cookbooks and has written for The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, Vogue, Bon Appetite, Food and Wine, and more. Epicurious has called her one of the one hundred greatest home cooks of all time. And The New York Times has described her as being at the forefront of the new generation of authentic, approachable authors. She sits on the kitchen cabinet advisory board for the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and is the founder of Equity at the Table, an inclusive digital directory of women and nonbinary individuals in food. She lives in the Hudson Valley with her wife and their dogs. So without further ado, here is my conversation with the wonderful Julia Turshen.

[00:04:14] **Kendra** Well, welcome, Julia, to the podcast, I'm so excited to have you on.

[00:04:19] **Julia** Thank you so much for having me on. I'm really excited to talk to you.

[00:04:23] **Kendra** When I am not talking about books, I am talking about food. And in fact, I have an entire two bookshelves dedicated to my food books because I'm very passionate about it, like a lot of us are. But this is my first interview with a cookbook author, so I am just over-the-moon excited. I don't know why I didn't think that those two worlds could have combined.

[00:04:47] **Julia** Yeah, I'm really excited to talk to you for so many reasons, including that. And I'm very honored to be the first cookbook author you've had on. And I do think it kind of speaks to how books get sort of categorized, you know, by booksellers, by libraries, by readers, and that cookbooks aren't often considered "real books."

[00:05:13] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:05:13] **Julia** So, yeah, I'm excited to talk to you about all of the above. So. Yeah. Thanks for having me.

[00:05:19] **Kendra** Well, you have this amazing cookbook, called SIMPLY JULIA, but this isn't your first cookbook. So what were some of the previous stuff you've worked on? And what was different about this book that you specifically wanted to change and maybe take a different take on how you'd previously written cookbooks in the past?

[00:05:40] **Julia** Sure. You know, I have worked on a range of cookbooks. And I've done a combination of authoring my own cookbooks. So I've done my first solo cookbook came out in 2016. It was called SMALL VICTORIES. In 2017, I did a book that had a bunch of contributors to it called FEED THE RESISTANCE. And in 2018, I did another solo book called NOW AND AGAIN. But previous to that, for like a decade before that, and to this day, I continue to do a lot of collaborative work on cookbooks. I do a lot of coauthoring, a lot of like basically project management, lots of writing. So all in all, when you count all the books I've helped kind of shepherd into the world, both my own and other people's, SIMPLY JULIA is the fifteenth cookbook I've worked on now. But yeah, it's been a wide range of experiences. And the second part of your question, how is this one different? Is that what you asked me? I think, right? Okay, so I would say SIMPLY JULIA is absolutely the most practical book I've ever written. And I also believe it to be the most personal book I've ever written. So I think those two qualities are things I've tried to, you know, imbue in all the other things I've worked on, you know, making work that's really practical and useful, but also work that's, you know, personal. But I think this book is definitely like the most of both of those things.

[00:07:06] **Kendra** Yeah. And I loved your intro where you describe kind of the philosophy of how you were writing this book, which I always really loved to read because it kind of sets the tone for the whole book and your take on food and how you want to present your recipes and why you've included the recipes you have in this book. And you talk a little bit about how your wife has type 1 diabetes. And so you wanted to change the way . . . or focus, I guess, on the type of foods that you would cook at home for her and for you and how you eat on an everyday basis. Can you talk a little bit about that and how that helped you strategize and plan out this cookbook?

[00:07:43] **Julia** Sure, yeah. You know, this book is . . . it's from me. And I am a home cook, you know, a daily home cook pre-pandemic—which I think is just important to mention because unlike a lot of other cookbook authors, I'm not also running a restaurant or a bakery. I'm not also on television. I don't also run a blog. Like, I am all about home cooking. This is what I do all day, every day. And so all the food in this book comes from my home kitchen to yours, which means two things. One, I'm writing from the seat and mentality of a home cook. So I'm not writing recipes that are trying to impress anyone. I'm just trying to, like, make dinner that we enjoy. And I'm also not ever going to tell you to use like two or three pans or bowls if you can get away with using one because us home cooks do so much labor. You know, we don't just cook. We're also cleaning up. We're also grocery shopping and organizing and keeping track of like a mental inventory. And so I just wanted to acknowledge all those things.

[00:08:48] **Julia** But the other part about this book coming from my home kitchen to everyone else's is my home kitchen is the one that serves both me and my wife, Grace. And Grace, about five years ago as an adult, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. And to make a complicated and just very demanding, I would say, chronic illness. . . . To simplify it, to oversimplify it, if anyone listening doesn't know . . . because I didn't know so much before she was diagnosed. . . . You know, type 1 and type 2 are very different. And type 1 means your body essentially is not producing insulin, which is a really necessary thing for our survival. So basically, every time you eat, you need insulin. And if we, you know, if you don't live with type 1, your body manages this on its own. And it does it, and it functions really well. And if you have type 1, you have to do that on your own. So basically, Grace has to all day, every day—like everyone who lives with type 1—has to just do all of this calculation and figure out what she's eating, how much insulin she needs to take. So this is all to say, when she was very first diagnosed, and she was learning all this—because it's like learning a new language—you know, it was much easier if she was eating incredibly, sort of, low carb foods because they just require less insulin. And if she was eating really simple stuff, so it was easy to know exactly what was in it, how much was in it, just as she was figuring out this new math, basically, that she was going to have to do forever. So, yeah, it was really helpful to eat like this lower carb diet when she was first diagnosed.

[00:10:31] **Julia** And as time has gone on—you know, I mentioned this was a few years ago—that's changed. You know, she's learned the new language. And she can eat whatever she wants, whenever she wants. But that kind of caretaking, that sort of level of consideration, I was applying to what I was cooking. You know, that hasn't changed for me. One of the things I love about the fact that I love to cook is that it's a way for me to express care and consideration. But anyway, a lot of those kind of lower carbohydrate, but very familiar, very comforting foods, you know, that was like a scary time for us. And so I wanted to give Grace, as the person who does most of the cooking in our house, like I wanted to give her foods that she loved and were super comforting and made her feel a bit more taken care of at like a particularly scary time. So a lot of those foods are foods we continue to really enjoy, even as like her restrictions have become, you know, absent and nonrestrictive.

[00:11:32] **Kendra** Yeah. And that can be such an overwhelming time when you're just starting out a new medical diet. And you begin like looking at all the labels and all of the things. And I don't know, for me, when I was diagnosed back when I was a teenager, I. . . . They didn't require the allergens on the labels at the bottom. Like, so you had to scroll through everything. And so my mom didn't really know what to do. Like, she didn't really have the tools to figure all this out. So I kind of more did that as an adult. And so when I

was reading your cookbook, and I read that, I was like, oh, I might . . . I might actually be able to eat food in this cookbook.

[00:12:14] **Julia** Mm hmm.

[00:12:14] **Kendra** And that made me very excited.

[00:12:17] **Julia** Yeah.

[00:12:17] **Kendra** It's one of the first cookbooks where I've read it, and it was kind of asking me to kind of upgrade my own cooking style in a way that was helpful as opposed to trying to make me cook like someone else. It was saying, you can cook like you; here are some extra tools you can do to upgrade your cooking or maybe just new ideas. And I felt invited into the cookbook instead of being like a bystander on the outside. That's one of the reasons I wanted to talk to you because that's such an incredible thing to me, as someone who loves food and reads a gazillion cookbooks a year and is really into food, that I felt like this was one of the first ones that was kind of "for me," if that makes sense.

[00:13:00] **Julia** It absolutely makes sense. And it means so much to me to hear. And I just thank you for that. And that is definitely something I try and do with my work. And definitely in this cookbook, I want it to feel welcoming. I don't want anyone to feel judged when they open it for any reason. You know . . . what you eat, what you don't eat, your cooking ability or lack thereof, your body, you know, whatever. Like, I just really wanted it to feel warm and inviting and personal to kind of welcome you, but also as much about you as it is about me. So I don't know, hearing how it's landed for you just means a lot to me. So, thank you.

[00:13:44] **Kendra** I really appreciate it. And I . . . Listeners won't be able to see this, but I have tabbed your cookbook.

[00:13:51] **Julia** It's my love language. Post-Its.

[00:13:54] **Kendra** And I would go. . . . I've been through it, and I would go to mark a recipe. And I was like, oh, I've already marked that one. Okay, well, I'll just use the tab on a different one. I really loved it because I have these staples in my kitchen that I always keep. Like I have. . . . I love lentils. You talk to me for ten minutes about food, and I'll start talking about lentils. I've been working on lentil recipes since 2019 just because they're my . . . almost my favorite ingredient now. And I just think that's kind of funny. And so I love that. And I have with them, I have always hot sauce. I need heat in all of my food. I always have curry in my spice cabinet. So you have these lists in the front of your cookbook, which I fell in love with. And I was like, oh, what are my five? I had this whole conversation with myself. And my husband's like, "Why are muttering to yourself over there with that cookbook?" I was like, "Oh, I'm planning." He's like, "More lentils?" I'm like, "Yes."

[00:14:53] **Julia** Does he like lentils as much as you do or. . . ?

[00:14:56] **Kendra** Not anymore!

[00:14:58] **Julia** He's lentilled out.

[00:15:00] **Kendra** Also, he—bless—he is from California, and I'm from Appalachia. But somehow, I love heat and he doesn't.

[00:15:08] **Julia** Hmm.

[00:15:08] **Kendra** If you're not . . . your eyes aren't watering, and you don't have that beautiful tingle on your tongue, I don't think it's hot enough. And he is like, "No, no." He's the mild sauce, kind of, white guy. And I make fun of him endlessly about it. So a lot of times, I'll just make lentils with tons of spice. I accidentally put like twice as much jalapeño powder in this past batch. And now I'm just like, you know, it's sinus season. Let's just clean out the sinuses.

[00:15:35] **Julia** Yeah, clear it out.

[00:15:36] **Kendra** It's really good. So how did you narrow it down to like five items in each of these different categories that you talk about in the front of the book?

[00:15:46] **Julia** Yeah, you know, I mentioned this in the book, but I . . . In a lot of cookbooks, not every cookbook, but often in cookbooks, you will find, either in the front or the back of the book, like an ingredient kind of section, a pantry section, and equipment list where someone, you know, the author will tell you all the things you need to make everything in the book. Or they'll tell you their things that they can't live without and stuff like that. I've written lists like that in the past for my own books, for other people's books. And I basically in SIMPLY JULIA just wanted to be the least stressed out I could possibly be as a cookbook author in the hopes of not stressing any cookbook reader out. And to be just totally honest and transparent, those types of lists that are exhaustive and that tell you all these things you need to have—even though you really don't need to have all those things—they just stress me out. They stress me out to read, and they stress me out to write. You know, I feel like, what if I'm missing something? Or what if I'm calling for something that someone doesn't want? Or, you know, I just, you know. Even thinking about it now, I'm stressed out.

[00:17:01] **Julia** So in this book, I wanted to do something a little bit more, I don't know, lighthearted but still hopefully helpful. So instead of one long, long, you know, exhaustive section, I did five separate lists. Each of the lists has five items on it. And you don't need any of these things. I just wanted to share in these five different sections, things that are really useful to me. So it's like the five spices I always have on hand. It's fine if you don't have them. These are the ones I have. The five things that are always in my cupboard. The five things I kind of think about and do to just make sure the atmosphere of my kitchen is really fun. So that includes like putting music on when I cook or maybe using my grandmother's dishes when we eat and not caring if one breaks in the process because at least I'm using it, you know, that kind of thing.

[00:17:54] **Julia** So I feel like it's really cool for me to hear that you were, out loud, having like a conversation with the book because I always think of myself as being in a conversation with my readers. That's how I think about my writing. That's how I write. I think about, you know, I wanted to have my voice. Like, I want it to sound like we're talking. And I feel like I'm listening when I'm writing. So the fact that you were, you know, saying this stuff out loud, and your husband was like, "Who are you talking to?" I feel like "Me!" Like, right here. I'm right here. Like, we're talking. Like, we're in this conversation. So that's really cool to hear. And part of what excites me about hearing that is that that's exactly why I was like, okay, just five things each, not fifteen things or twenty-five things. Just a handful because I think that can help encourage other people to think about, okay, what are your five things? And you know, for you, it's like lentils, it sounds like. Spicy things, you know.

Like. . . . And it's fun to think about—or I think it's fun to think about—what makes your kitchen your kitchen? What makes the food you love the food you love? Like, I don't know. I think these are really pleasant things to think about.

[00:19:06] **Kendra** Yeah. Yeah, definitely. And especially, like, you include kimchi. And I love kimchi. I'm very into pickling, which is another thing that my spouse hates. So he doesn't know why I love pickled onions, and I make them all the time because they go on everything.

[00:19:25] **Julia** Yeah, they're so good.

[00:19:26] **Kendra** And I was like, look, she even includes some pickled things in here. And he just is like rolling his eyes at me, like, "Oh my goodness. Like, why is someone enabling you to keep doing this?" But you also include. . . . My favorite section list was "The Five Things That are Always in Your Cupboard." And you include beans in this and different kinds of vinegars. And so I think the bean is really underutilized in American cuisine just because it's so amazing. It's like the perfect, like, I don't know. Legumes are just my favorite thing in the world, probably, at this point. And so when I saw all of these different beans, it gave me a lot of great ideas how to use them because whenever I talk to other people, they're always like soup. And I'm like, okay, yes. Soup. But also what else? And I feel like you expanded that to round out your recipes and make them, you know, just very filling, but also very simple at the same time. Why is it do you think that the average person might be averse to working with beans? This is a very specific question. Sorry.

[00:20:36] **Julia** Ah, no. That's fine. I mean, this is the kind of question I live for. I also. . . . This was not planned, but I know no one listening can hear this. And obviously feel free to cut this out. But I have to tilt my computer down to show you I'm wearing my Rancho Gordo t-shirt, which is like my favorite bean company. This was not planned. You did not send me these questions in advance. I just love this company, and I love their beans. And I love wearing this t-shirt. So. Well, I think a few things. One is . . . especially dried beans, I think that—like a number of ingredients, and I'm thinking of things like yeast, stuff like that—I think dried beans are an ingredient that make home cooks feel a little nervous. Like, am I going to mess these up? Like, what's the right way to make this? Also make home cooks feel like time is not on their side because they take a while to cook, even though they're really simple to prepare. So I think that sort of fear of messing something up, I think lack of time—that comes through with dried beans.

[00:21:48] **Julia** And then I think beans in particular, whether dried or canned—and I am a proponent of both; I use both all the time—I think beans seem boring to people. And I think they seem like something you eat when there's nothing else to eat. And I think maybe they seem like they're lacking in, I don't know, flavor or fun. But I feel like beans are wonderful. And I think they're like. . . . When I have a bag of dried beans in my cabinet or, you know, a couple of cans of different types of beans—and I usually have a mixture of these things because I have a big cabinet—I just feel like no matter what, we have something like good to eat.

[00:22:28] **Julia** And by "good," I mean—because I don't like to moralize food; I'm trying not to use that word, but I just used it, so I want to explain what I mean, which is—I have something that I know is going to fill us up. It's going to be nutritious. And it's going to be like a blank canvas to go in any direction, most importantly. Like, beans are just like little vehicles for flavor. Like they can take on anything. And it can be mild. It can be spicy, you know. It can be for you and your husband, and you can both be happy. You know, they're

used across the world and, you know, every single culture and cuisine. And I think that tells us a lot. Like, they're really versatile. You know, they're affordable. It's like good for the environment. Like there's not a bad thing to say about beans, in my opinion. So, yeah, I am pro-bean. And I'm pro-lentil too.

[00:23:22] **Kendra** I really love them. My family did not eat them growing up at all. And so when I became an adult, I began experimenting more. And when I started dating my spouse, he's from California. So I would go out there. And it just was like a whole new world, all this fresh produce. Because growing up, we're kind of in a food desert in the sense that fresh food is hard to find. And when I was gluten free, some people didn't even believe gluten existed. It was that early. And so we would have to travel two hours to go to Trader Joe's or something in a bigger city. And so when I went to California, they could drive five minutes to the grocery store and have this wall of produce. And I lost my mind. And I was like, what is this? So I basically sat in my mother-in-law's kitchen, and we started talking about food. I learned about avocados, which are amazing. But my favorite thing probably was chickpeas. And even now, if I'm hungry—and I eat small meals, so if I'm hungry, I eat one kind of food at a time—I'll just take chickpeas from a can. And you strain them, dry them off a little bit, put oil in your pan. And you cook chickpeas on the stove and just add some spice. There's this black truffle garlic spice I've been using. It's a blend from a local spice shop, and it's amazing. And it's perfect. You can then save it later. It reheats well. Like I mean, like you said, you could take those chickpeas and then go a totally different direction as well.

[00:24:57] **Julia** Yep.

[00:24:57] **Kendra** If you want to go Italian or whatever you had in your cabinet. And they're just warm and comforting. But also I know that they're healthy for me, and I'm going to be able to process it with my medical diet. And it's just like, all of the things align with chickpeas.

[00:25:12] **Julia** Yeah, yeah. And it's so nice to know, you know, I don't know. I can't speak for you. But it sounds to me like it's nice to know you've got this thing you can fall back on, you know, especially if for any medical reason, you know, things are off the table for you. I think it's nice to surround yourself with the foods that make you feel good and, you know, that are easy to prepare. And you can just rely on them. Like, I feel like that's something that I love about home cooking is it just feels like this reliable thing in my home and in my life. So, yeah, I really. . . . What you said about chickpeas really resonates.

[00:25:57] **Kendra** And I like how you also mentioned at the beginning of the cookbook you wanted these ingredients to be readily available. And you talk about living in a rural area, and it needs to be within a certain mile radius. Was that always something you wanted to include in this cookbook? Or was it something that just came about as you were putting your recipes together for it?

[00:26:14] **Julia** Yeah, I mean, my rule for myself that I try to follow is, yeah, if I can't find it within, like, half an hour of my house . . . not meaning it's grown here because that would mean that I would never use like a lemon or lime or a banana . . . and I don't know, I love all those things . . . or chocolate or coffee or these things I consume a lot of. . . . I mean, yeah, ideally it would be great if we could have all those things grown near where we live. But anyway, my rule for my cookbook is I don't call for any ingredient I can't find within half an hour of my home. And if I do make an exception to that, which is rare, but if I do make an exception, I will tell you where you can find it online. And I will also tell you a bunch of

other things you could do with it. So you're not just using it for this one recipe that might be, you know, new to you. And the reason I do that is because I just want the recipes in my book to be recipes that most people can make wherever they are. And that feeling of accessibility feels really important to me. But also it's kind of . . . I don't know, it's a very imperfect goal because what's available within half an hour of my home, which is in a rural area, but, you know, I'm on the East Coast, you know, I'm in New York State. And, you know, what's available half an hour from my home is different than somewhere in the middle of the country or on the West Coast. And not to say my options are better or worse, they're just different. You know, food changes depending on where you are. So I try to keep things pretty, I don't know, simple and easy to find because I just . . . I don't want the feeling of like, "oh, I don't know where I would find that ingredient," or "I have to go to a specialty place," or "I have to spend a lot of money to make this recipe" . . . like any of those things, I just . . . I don't want that to happen for anyone who cooks from my book.

[00:28:08] **Julia** That said, I think there are some, you know, specialty foods and things that are locally made that are amazing. And like, we have a neighbor who keeps bees, so he gives us honey all the time. It's amazing. Like what an amazing neighbor. And it tastes different than other honey I've had. But like, I'm not going to say, go to my neighbor Peter and get the honey, you know, to make this recipe. Like that's a special thing I enjoy in my home, I'm so grateful for. But I'm not going to specify it to that degree because that makes it inaccessible for other people. So I try to keep things as kind of open and broad as possible with, I guess, just the disclaimer here on your show to say like whatever is really special near you, like, it doesn't mean you can't have it. By all means, enjoy it.

[00:28:57] **Kendra** Your recipes allow for a lot of substitutions. And they also are like almost like a starting place. And if you want to play with the recipe, you have that ability. And you leave that open ended, which I really love. And I found it very accessible in that way as well because I could swap out a bean for different kind of bean. Or, you know, most of them don't use a lot of flour. So it's really easy just to use like a Bob's Red Mill or something and like, swap that out, which is really great and makes it sort of fun to make. I like to make the same thing over and over and change it a little bit each time to see what I like and I don't like. You could do that with your recipes.

[00:29:35] **Julia** Yeah, I'm so glad to hear that because that's definitely something I encourage, and I love to hear because I just think cooking is flexible. Like, I think there's a sense out in the world, I see often that recipes have to be followed to the letter and that they're almost prescriptions. And I just don't agree with that. And I think recipes are jumping off points. And I put a lot of time and effort and thought into how I write my recipes. There's a lot of time and thought and effort put into testing my recipes so that if you are someone who wants to follow the recipe exactly as written with the exact amounts, like you can trust that it will turn out. You know, I take that trust very, very seriously. And I don't take it for granted. So, you know, all that work has been done. So you can rely on them. But also, if you just flip past the pictures and read about the story behind the recipe and just feel like, oh, that's an interesting combination. And you go do it on your own, and you never follow the recipe, that still feels to me like worth it and great. And, you know, people come to cookbooks for all different reasons. And some people come for the formal recipes and to follow the instructions. And some people come to riff on it. And, you know, I just want to hopefully give everyone who comes to the book something. So, yeah, I don't really mind or care even what you do with the recipes. But if they're useful for you in some way, then that makes me feel really good.

[00:31:06] **Kendra** And I really love how your take is on. . . . You know, the subtitle is "110 Easy Recipes for Healthy Comfort Food." So for you, what does "healthy comfort food" mean? And how did that affect your approach to building the recipes for this cookbook?

[00:31:25] **Julia** Sure. You know, healthy comfort food to me means having a healthy, comfortable, like comforting relationship with cooking and eating. You know, this is a healthy cookbook that's not about weight loss. And it's not about restriction or deprivation of any kind. And it's very much about just feeling really good and feeling good while we're cooking . . . you know, putting the music on or whatever it might be . . . having ingredients that are easy to find, and also just feeling good when we're eating—eating food that, you know, is fun to eat, is full of flavor. Also just, you know, gives you lots of nutrients and all these wonderful things, but without being, you know, hit over the head with any of it.

[00:32:11] **Julia** So, yeah, I think in terms of how this all came to be, like writing the recipes, it's interesting because I love food from all over the world. And I've worked on books that, you know, are from different parts of the world, represent different cuisines. I've worked with different chefs and authors on that. I've eaten, you know, at all sorts of restaurants during my life, like not really over the last year, but in the before times. I've gotten to travel and stuff. I've felt really inspired by so many different types of food. And that means I've always had a hard time describing what kind of food I make when someone's like, "Oh, what kind of food is in your books?" I always just say, like, "Oh, it's home cooking." Like it's food that's easy to make at home. But I've had a hard time describing, like, exactly what the recipes are. And I tend to just start talking a lot, as I'm doing right now. And I don't know how to describe it. And one day, my wife, Grace, was just like, "Julia, you make healthy comfort food." Like that's what you make. And it just felt very like clarifying for me. And I'm like, Oh yeah, that is what I make. And it's like food that is from different places. But it all comes back to the sort of healthy comfort food. And it's, you know, on a logistical level, it doesn't leave out any ingredient. You know, I used sugar in my desserts. I use butter. I use sour cream. I put sour cream in so many recipes. I just love sour cream. You know, I'm not afraid of fat or sugar. I'm definitely not afraid of flavor, but I'm just very considerate of what I use and how much I use. And I just make sure it all serves a purpose. Yeah. And I think it comes back to what we were talking about earlier, like when Grace was first diagnosed, and that I get to just apply a lot of care and consideration with what I'm cooking. I think that kind of comes through in the healthy comfort thing.

[00:34:00] **Kendra** Yeah. And I feel like, for me, when I think of comfort food, I think of nostalgia. But for me it's been a struggle because all of the food that I'm nostalgic for, I can no longer eat because it was all full of, you know, what is it, wheat, soy, and corn that make up like so much of the majority of the American diet. And I'm not supposed to have any of those things. And so, I feel like I'm creating my own nostalgia in a way. And that's very much almost like another ingredient in your recipes because it kind of evokes a nostalgia that you may not even actually have. But you still have that warm, homey, kind of feeling with your recipes. And I've been recently working on a recipe for dairy free, gluten free tomato soup made with coconut milk. And of course, I dump a bunch of spice in it.

[00:34:59] **Julia** Delicious.

[00:34:59] **Kendra** But it's like, I open up four cans. I pour them into my Vitamix, put the spices in, tons of black pepper. And you, like, you know, you blend it. You put it on the stove. You could heat it up. You save it for later. And I was flipping through your book, and you have a carrot soup recipe. And I was like, "Look! Look, Sam!" Poor Sam has really

had a lot of earful from this book apparently. I was like, "Look! Look! I can make this. This is like what I make." He's like, "I'm happy for you."

[00:35:34] **Julia** Well, I'm happy for you too. And your tomato soup sounds great. It sounds delicious. And tomato and coconut are good friends.

[00:35:42] **Kendra** Most people were like, well, they think coconut, they think tropical. But I'm like, this is a way to get dairy-like fat into your food.

[00:35:52] **Julia** Oh, super creamy. Yeah.

[00:35:53] **Kendra** It's amazing

[00:35:55] **Julia** No, and the flavors go so well together. But I think most importantly, from what you said too, just like, I don't know, that sounds really powerful to me, like creating your own nostalgia and having foods that are comforting to you, but that also take care of what your current needs are. Like, to me, that's true comfort and true caretaking. So I think that's great. That also just sounds so good. I feel like I want to go make that now.

[00:36:20] **Kendra** Feel free. Let me know how it goes.

[00:36:25] **Kendra** I really love . . . there's these sections. I'm not sure what you call them. It's . . . they're on this blue paper in the cookbook. And you can see the different places where they appear in the cookbook, if you're looking at it. And they are titled "A Thought." And you cover different parts of your personal connection with food and some of the things that you wanted to include as almost like interludes between the recipes. And what was your process like for that? And how did you decide what you wanted to include in the cookbook?

[00:36:57] **Julia** Sure. So, yeah, what you're referring to are a handful of these kind of short essays that are just pretty randomly distributed through the book. They're there because they do, you know, give me the opportunity to discuss things that feel incredibly important to me, incredibly relevant in a book about healthy comfort food. And they weren't necessarily tied to like an individual recipe. You know, every recipe in the book is introduced with, you know, a story with some context, really, for why I included it, what it means to me, where I learned it from, who I learned it from, that kind of thing. But there were a few topics, including, you know, a reflection on body image. To me, that's a really important thing to talk about in a book that's about healthy comfort food that's not about weight loss. There's an essay about anxiety, my anxiety and the intersection of that and cooking, you know, because mental health to me is a huge part of feeling healthy. And then there's, you know, there's a love letter to my gas grill just because I love . . . I love grilling. And I love my gas grill. But also that's an extension of that sort of thing we were talking about earlier, like the ease of the recipes, the simplicity of them. You know, part of why I love my gas grill is because I can cook a ton of food, and I don't have a bunch of pots and pans to clean. That's part of why I love it. It also means I'm outside for a little while. And that makes me feel really good. So all these things kind of tie in, but they weren't, yeah, attached to any particular recipe.

[00:38:29] **Julia** And my editor, Julie, who was wonderful to work with, she really encouraged this sort of extra writing. And this is something that definitely sets SIMPLY JULIA apart from my other books. I've never included essays like this in a book. And I'm so glad I did, not only to address those issues, but to also basically extend this conversation I

feel like I'm always in with readers like we were talking about before. And I think that anyone who picks up a cookbook is someone who's, in my opinion and my experience because I'm a person who picks up cookbooks all the time. . . . I'm sitting, I mean, I know not everyone can see, but you can see these bookshelves behind me. They're full of cookbooks. And these aren't all the cookbooks I own. Like, there's more in my home. And this is a lot. And, you know, I know that I'm a person who picks up cookbooks all the time. And that means I'm thinking about food. But it also means I'm thinking about a lot of other things that have to do with food besides just recipes. And I just value that in my readers. And I want that to be part of the conversation I'm able to have with everyone. You know, I can talk about the recipes all day. I'm so happy too. We can talk about all the soups. Like, I love all the soups in the book. But also it feels really valuable to get to talk about things like, yeah, mental health, about body image, about grilling. You know, like these things are just part of it for me. Like when I'm thinking about food, I'm not just thinking about, like, you know, what am I going to have for lunch?

[00:40:01] **Kendra** And I really love that, that you have that personal connection. And when people talk about healthy cooking, it's always like, followed up. Oh, like, how much weight have you lost? And that was never part of this book, which is what I love because for me, as someone who's lost weight because they're sick, that has a lot of negative connotations for me. And there's no calorie counts. There's no nothing. And for me, eating healthy is to fuel my body in the best way I can, whatever it looks like. And so I really love that about this because I feel like you really capture what healthy eating really is, which is just to fuel your body. It's not a cosmetic thing. It's like a whole heart thing. I struggle sometimes when I see other healthy cookbooks because they do focus so much on weight loss. And that's just not. . . . That really just shouldn't really be a part of it. I know that's very opinionated, but like, I have lots of feelings around it.

[00:41:01] **Julia** It's an opinion 1,000 percent agree with. And that is definitely a huge part of what makes me so happy that I've been able to publish this book and to just make a little bit more room on the shelf of, you know, healthy cookbooks to leave room for one that isn't about weight loss and doesn't promote it because weight loss does not equal health. You know, skinny and healthy are not the same thing. And I really appreciate what you just shared, and I think that's really valuable for people to know that sometimes weight loss, it doesn't feel good for someone. Or it doesn't come from something that they're happy about. Or, you know, and it can be caused by all sorts of things, you know, including depression or anxiety. Like it doesn't correlate with necessarily having a healthy body or a healthy relationship with your body. So I think it's a really, honestly dangerous thing that a lot of healthy cookbooks kind of promote this idea that healthy and skinny are the same thing. I think that is, yeah, I think it's dangerous.

[00:42:12] **Kendra** Well, I could talk to you about your cookbook for ages, but I wanted to ask you some fun questions.

[00:42:18] **Julia** Sure. Yeah, please.

[00:42:20] **Kendra** So Kimchi. I have been looking for Kimchi, but I live in the Old South, kind of rural. And so I'm struggling to find a place that sells kimchi. My skill is not great enough that I could make it. So, where would you recommend a process of either a brand that you like or a way of finding a brand that you like?

[00:42:46] **Julia** Sure, you know, you mentioned to me where you're located. And I don't know specifically what is available in that area, but I know that the Korean population in

the American South is just expanding every day. And in places like Atlanta and outside of Atlanta and stuff, there's so many amazing Korean grocery stores. So I think finding where, you know, the Korean community is closest to you, finding out where, you know, any Asian American community is closest to you, like you can probably find kimchi in any of those stores. And it's so nice to support those stores. But I think if that is, you know, a far drive, I'm not sure off the top of my head about mail order, like online.

[00:43:40] **Julia** But one brand that I love so much—I really just think they're kimchi is so good—the brand is actually called "Mother-in-Law's." It's kind of fun and easy to remember. And I just think they make excellent kimchi. And I know that you can order the red chili powder, the gochugaru, that is used to make kimchi. You can order that from them. You can order the gochujang, which is like a chili paste made with that chili powder. So I know they send both of those things. I don't know if they send kimchi in the mail. They might. It's just kimchi is like a . . . it's alive, right? Like it's this preserved, fermented thing that continues to preserve and ferment. So I think when it comes to shipping, it might be a little complicated. I don't know. I could be totally wrong. But you can order those spices and flavorings from them, which is great, because then if you do want to try your own, then you've got those ingredients that kind of kickstart it.

[00:44:35] **Julia** And making kimchi at home is actually, I think, a really, really fun thing to do. And you can make like a quick kind of pickled kimchi. You can, you know, ferment it for like a year. You can do everything in between. So, yeah, I think also, like, there's amazing, amazing, amazing Korean cooking videos on YouTube and stuff. So you can follow those. That's a fun way to learn how to do that. And kimchi, I think when I say it or when I hear that word, I most often think of, you know, cabbage kimchi with red chili. I think it's like the most popular one. But there's like hundreds of types of kimchi. And from what I understand. . . . And I'll just give you some context for my understanding because I worked on a PBS travel show and a cookbook that was about Korean food, and we got to travel around Korea. . . . So I am not an expert here, but this is where my whatever amount of knowledge I have is coming from that experience and shopping in a lot of Korean grocery stores in the states. . . . Kimchi is pretty much like a verb, like you can kimchi, like you can pickle different things and ferment different things. So it's a lot of fun to try different types and kimchi different vegetables. And there's like a type of kimchi. . . . I can't remember the Korean word for it. I'm sorry. But it's called water kimchi, and it actually has no chili in it. Like your spouse might really like it. And it's just like a very . . . kind of like . . . I don't know. It's like a really gentle, kind of mild flavor, just like slightly pickled, like a teeny bit sour. Not really. It's just I don't know, it's really nice.

[00:46:12] **Kendra** Now, I've talk to you about my obsession with lentils. So do you have a similar ingredient where you just love it so much that you want to play with it, whatever varieties or anything like that?

[00:46:26] **Julia** Oh my gosh. I feel that way about most things in the kitchen. Maybe, I don't know. The first thing that just came to mind actually was buttermilk. In the back of the book, you know, we talked about in the front of the book, there's five lists that each have five things on it. And then, because I just love making lists, it's like how my brain organizes things. So in the back of the book, there's another section, seven lists. And each of those has seven things on it. So one of them is a list of ideas of things you can do with buttermilk because a question I get asked so frequently, like way more frequently than I ever could have predicted, is what can I do with leftover buttermilk? Because I think a lot of people buy it to make something like a cake or cornbread or pancakes or something. And whatever recipe they're using will call for maybe a cup of it. But, you know, buttermilk

tends to be sold in quart containers. And a quart is four cups. So maybe you use one, and then you have this container with three more cups. And you don't know what to do with it. And I just have been asked that so many times that I was like, well, let me come up with seven sort of fun ideas for things you can do with leftover buttermilk. So that's an ingredient I think I'm always kind of thinking about, like, oh, what other things can you make with it or do with it? It's also an incredibly versatile ingredient. You know, it adds so much just acid and flavor and kind of tenderizes things from cakes to chicken. You know, it's just great. I love it, and I usually have some in my fridge because I now use it to make those seven things and more.

[00:48:02] **Kendra** All right. So we've talked a bit about your cookbook. Are there any cookbooks that have come out recently that you have especially loved that you would like to share with our listeners?

[00:48:10] **Julia** Sure. I appreciate that question. So one cookbook, I'm biased. I'm extremely biased because I got to work on it. But I just think it's truly one of the most wonderful books to have come out recently. But of all time. And it's called IN BIBI'S KITCHEN. And my friend and colleague, Hawa Hassan is the author of the book. And I got to help Hawa make this book. And it is just a really, really wonderful special book. And it's recipes from and interviews with grandmothers from the eight African countries that touch the Indian Ocean. So it's a collection, again, of recipes from home cooks. There's also just a lot of sort of storytelling and history. And their voices are in the book. You know, the interviews are just, you know, these wonderful interviews with them. So that's a really, really special book. There's beautiful photography in it. So a shout out for IN BIBI'S KITCHEN.

[00:49:07] **Julia** And there's also a book that came out last year called, SNACKING CAKES by a friend. Yossy wrote the book, and it is . . . I think it's like fifty recipes. But each has like a bunch of variations. And all of these cakes are so simple. They're like, you can make them in one bowl. You bake them in like one pan, like you're not, you know, taking out a big mixer or anything. And they're just really simple, wonderful cakes. So SNACKING CAKES I love. And lastly, it's not a cookbook, but I think it's. . . I don't know. It's very related to this conversation. And it's a book I just any chance I get to share books that feel important to me. There's a book by Aubrey Gordon called WHAT WE DON'T TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT FAT that came out a couple of months ago. I think if, you know, if any of our conversation today that touched on how do we define healthy or, you know, any of that, anything about body image or anything. Like if that, you know, if your ear perked up a little bit for any of that, like, please read this book. It's really, really important. And, yeah, it's great.

[00:50:21] **Kendra** Well, thank you for sharing those, and I'll make sure to link those in the show notes also so listeners can go check them out.

[00:50:25] **Julia** Awesome. Wonderful. Thank you.

[00:50:26] **Kendra** And also, where can people find you and your podcast? Because you also have a podcast, which I was listening to yesterday, and I just fell in love with Jia Tolentino all over again.

[00:50:40] **Julia** She's awesome. She also has such a great voice, like she's such a great person to have on your podcast because her voice is so wonderful. We actually had a conversation recently that she has like a whole side life doing like voiceover work.

[00:50:54] **Kendra** I noticed. I've heard some of that. I was like, wait, I think that's Jia Tolentino.

[00:50:59] **Julia** Yeah. That's so funny. Anyway. Yes, I have a podcast called Keep Calm and Cook On. Thank you for bringing it up because I love making it. And actually, Aubrey Gordon, who I just told you about, I've done an episode with her. And Hawa from IN BIBI'S KITCHEN, a couple of years ago, I did an episode with her and this really, really wonderful woman, Beth Linskey, who they have like a really special kind of like mentor relationship. So anyway, you can find that. You can find all the information about me and my books, including everything about SIMPLY JULIA. You know, all of the above can be found at my website, which is just juliaturshen.com. And it has links to everything. And, you know, you can buy the book from my local bookstore. I can sign it for you if you want. All the podcast shows are there, so. . . . "Episodes" that would be the right word. Yeah. All there.

[00:51:50] **Kendra** All right. Well, thank you. I'm sure everyone will go check it out. I'm going to go do some cookbook shopping probably here in a few minutes. So thank you for sharing those. I really appreciate it. And thank you for coming on the show.

[00:52:03] **Julia** Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. This really was a pleasure, and I appreciate it.

[00:52:10] **Kendra** And that's our show. I'd like to thank Julia Turshen for talking with me about SIMPLY JULIA, which is out now from HarperWave. You can find Julia Turshen on Twitter and Instagram (@turshen) and on her website, juliaturshen.com. Reading Women is part of the LitHub Radio Network. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced and edited by me, Kendra Winchester. Our music is by Miki Saito with Isaac Greene. And you can find us on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thank you so much for listening.