When I was 5, I drew a picture filled with dozens of green eyes. This was a portrait of my mother, the all-seeing and knowing. She had eyes in the back of her head; nothing escaped her and she remembered everything. I later came to appreciate that she was also wise and had great patience. She was a great listener. She had strong opinions and values, but was very accepting of others’ views. She was very forgiving, never vindictive. She was both frugal and generous. As a child we learned to waste nothing, but at the same time to be generous. We learned to take care of our toys, to finish our plate (or miss dessert), to be respectful, and to always do our best. Most importantly, Mom was always there for us.

Recently I was asked to make a presentation to young scientists about how I became interested in earthquakes and what inspired me to become interested in natural disasters. I answered by saying that it all started when I was rushed to the hospital along the San Andreas Fault from Millbrae to San Francisco, where I was born. I also said that my mother was the one who most challenged me and inspired me to follow my heart, to take risks, and to succeed. She set the standard and defied the odds. Mom initiated her professional career as an artist at a time when it was not easy for a woman to have a career and raise a family. But her creative expression as artist and teacher was not simply another challenge. She did not become a mother who painted, or a painter who was also a mother; each role was intertwined and essential to the other.

Mom was a fantastic and creative cook, and she passed as much of her skill to her kids as we were willing to absorb. Beautiful food was the centrepiece of every family occasion: from elegant roast legs of lamb and a dessert of floating island custard, to hearty cassoulet and French bread. She could ‘throw something together’ and make it special. A few bones and an onion could be made into something special, or so it seemed. A small chicken could feed a family of six if necessary. Mom would volunteer to eat the neck, saying it was her favorite part. Was that because giving was more important than receiving or because she genuinely liked the neck? Maybe these were one and the same. In any case, she always seemed to be happiest serving a beautiful meal and watching people enjoy it.

Mom loved to talk about her childhood. Her fondest early memories were about her time in the country with her maternal grandparents, Grandma Virginie and Grandpa Jean. In the 1930s and early 40s, they had a small farm in Marina, near Monterey. It was a very rustic place, with no electric power, sewerage or public water. They had no car and walked to the store several miles for groceries. They were largely self-sufficient, raising their own poultry for meat and eggs, goats for cheese and milk, and lots of vegetables. Mom spent many summer vacations and weekends there with her brother, cousins, parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents. For her, the simple country life and the bounty that earth could provide had the greatest appeal, the deepest meaning, and the highest value. She loved it and brought as much of that childhood feeling as she could to their home at Lamothe in southern France.

Lamothe, which Mom and Dad bought in 1995, was (and is) a place where all of the past could come together in the present, where all of the childhood memories could be relived, and her French roots fully restored and connected to the American ones. In her book ‘Souvenirs’ which she wrote in 2010, she said about Lamothe “Why is this paradise so much like my childhood one? The simplest answer is that in these two places at these two particular periods I have experienced profound warmth, intimacy and timelessness”.

On a little promontory overlooking Lamothe and several nearby villages is a little seventeenth century church, L’Eglise de Saint Cecile du Cayrou. The landscape below the church and surrounding Lamothe is filled with vineyards, and fields of grain and sunflowers. The medieval town of Castelneau de Montmiral is clearly visible several km away. L’Eglise is where, at Mom’s request, we will lay her ashes to rest.

Jeanne, Mom, Ma Jeanne (to her grandchildren), we love you and will greatly miss you.