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**Ellise Pierce: Cowgirl Chef**

*posted by Layne Lynch at 1:18 PM*

In 2007, Ellise Pierce packed up her life in Texas and moved across the world to join her boyfriend in Paris. The idea seemed romantic: a talented freelance writer living in Paris writing by day and cooking Texas-inspired cuisine for her sweet boyfriend by night. Things didn't pan out.

When Pierce arrived in Paris, her writing career stalled. She had trouble conquering the language barrier. The magazines she had written for at home were cutting their freelance budgets, merging with other media entities, or were simply going out of business. And at French markets, Pierce couldn't tell the difference between powdered or granulated sugar. She started to severely miss her family and Texas cuisine. She had moved here for love and happiness, so why wasn't she happy?

In her book *Cowgirl Chef*, Pierce says she "retreated to the only world [she] knew: the kitchen" to cure her longing for home. After a while, the sadness lessened and understanding French ingredients got easier. Pierce joined a support group of other Americans who had moved to Paris to pursue dreams, loves, and careers. Over time, members of the group suggested Pierce consider her hobby of cooking as a means to support herself. Out of ideas, Pierce figured 'What the heck?'

She started a catering company called [Cowgirl Tacos](#) that specialized in Tex-Mex cuisine, created a food blog called [Cowgirl Chef](#), and used the blog to pitch recurring columns back home in Texas. Success followed, and now she has a new book out called [Cowgirl Chef](#) based on the food she cooked for her catering company and her blog. This month, Pierce starts her statewide book tour and talked with TEXAS MONTHLY about her experiences in France, growing up in Texas, and how she created a Texas-sized salad for her book.

**Tell me the story behind the book.**

The book came along with my catering business Cowgirl Tacos and my blog Cowgirl Chef. I was also writing for publications back home under the Cowgirl Chef byline. I was doing quite a bit of recipe development and testing and writing columns. Someone suggested to me that I write a cookbook, and I thought ‘Yeah, right. I can’t do a cookbook.’ But, I went back to Paris and decided I would at least see what recipes I had. When I looked at what I had actually written so far in terms of recipes and stories, I realized I did have enough for a cookbook. That was about a year ago.

### **What Texas culinary influences made their way into this book?**

I had a mom who cooked every night. She’d cook big dinners and she was happy to have me hang out with her in the kitchen while she was making dinner. We always had dessert. She would cook up a pound cake or some kind of cake. There was an emphasis on having a full meal and sitting down and having dinner as a family. She would make a big pot of meat sauce for spaghetti night, which is what you did back then. It wasn’t just ‘Let’s sit down and have spaghetti.’ It was ‘Let’s get out the red and white checked tablecloth and an old Chianti bottle with a candle in it.’ She would do beef stroganoff or some kind of Chinese food. She was pushing herself and taking us to different places around the world at the table. Maybe all families are like this, but my family always seemed to be thinking about food or talking about food.

### **How did your blog Cowgirl Chef develop?**

I came up with the blog to support my catering business that I started. I thought the blog could tell people what the catering business was doing or tell them about a new class that I was offering, and it just went from there. If you look at early posts it was a lot of “Oh look, we have a new class next week.” The Cowgirl Chef blog became something I loved doing, so I continued to write for that even when it wasn’t about Cowgirl Tacos. It took over my life. That made it possible for me to go back to the U.S. and say, “Look, I’m doing this blog called Cowgirl Chef, and I would like to write for you and do a column called Cowgirl Chef,” and I did. It was a natural evolution.

### **What was it like to move to Paris and come into a whole new world of cuisine?**

I traveled to Paris for years and years. The cuisine itself wasn’t new to me. I was familiar with French cuisine. What I wasn’t familiar with was the day-to-day stuff. It completely blew my mind and caused me all kinds of anxiety when I would go to the grocery store. I was living with a French guy who doesn’t know one thing from the next when it comes to food. I’d say, “What crème fraîche is like whipping cream?” or “Which one of these milks is the one that has less fat in it?” He didn’t know any of it. He was no help at all. I was constantly going to the grocery store and buying things I thought I needed and it was the wrong item. I had no friends over there I could call

on to get that advice. The whole thing was trial and error, and it was a lot of error in the beginning.

### How did you know what recipes you wanted to put in the book?

By the time I sat down to write the book, I had the recipes already assembled. The recipes reflect my time in Paris at that point. There are a lot of recipes that reflect what I was going through. There are some that come from my homesick period, like black-eyed peas, cornbread, the taco recipes, and other recipes that reflect my need to connect with Texas. The longer I lived there, the more I assimilated to what was around me, so the recipes for more French-style foods came up. The two different cuisines [of Texas and Paris] were starting to merge after a while.

### Is there a recipe in the book that resonates with you?

I wouldn't say I have a favorite, but this just popped in my head. There is a recipe for My Big Fat French Salad in the book. Suzanne was a poet I met in Paris, and she has become an incredible friend. We would go meet at this place where you would get these enormous salads. She would tell me about it, and I'd think 'Yeah, Yeah. Big salads. They are all over the place.' But these salads were huge! They had these fried potatoes on top and little pieces of ham, discs of goat cheese on toast, and the size of it reminded me of Texas. The fried potatoes on a salad were amazing. It was something that helped root me in Paris, and I wanted to make it at home.

My Big Fat French Salad

### Did you look at any other French cookbooks when you were putting your book together?

Yes. I have a wonderful friend and mentor in [Dorie Greenspan](#). She is awesome. She lives in Paris part time and was readily available to sit down with me over a cup of coffee or lunch and talk about the book, where I was on it, my frustrations, and how to get through them. She was just a phone call, an email, or a lunch away.

### Adapted Recipe for My Big Fat French Salad from *Cowgirl Chef*

Makes 2 dinner-size salads

1/2 pound of red-skinned potatoes, cut into 2-inch pieces

olive oil

sea salt and pepper

8 slices of bacon

6 slices from a baguette, toasted

about 6 tablespoons of fresh goat cheese

1 head of romaine lettuce, rinsed, dried, and sliced into 2-inch/5 cm strips  
a handful of cherry tomatoes, halved  
fresh herbs, such as chives, thyme, basil, parsley  
Champagne-Honey Vinaigrette (recipe follows)

Preheat your oven to 400°F. Put the potatoes on a parchment-lined cookie sheet, add some olive oil, salt, and pepper, and toss this all together. Give the pan a shake so the potatoes aren't crowded, and slide them into the oven. They'll take about 30 to 45 minutes total, but after 15 or 20 minutes, the halfway mark, pull them out of the oven, and flip them over so both sides are evenly cooked.

Fry up the bacon. Once it's cooked and crispy, let it drain on paper towels. Don't forget to pour off the bacon grease into an old jam jar, and then keep it in the fridge; it'll make your cornbread fabulous.

Toast the baguette pieces, then put a heaping tablespoon of fresh goat cheese on each piece of toast and slide back into the oven for just a minute or two so the cheese can warm up.

To assemble your salads, divide the lettuce between two bowls, crumble the bacon over, add the warm potatoes, and arrange the cherry tomatoes and baguette pieces around the sides. Use your kitchen scissors to snip your fresh herbs on top, serve, and pass around the vinaigrette.

### Champagne-Honey Vinaigrette

Makes about 1 cup

1 shallot, finely chopped

¼ cup of champagne vinegar

1 tablespoon of lemon juice + the zest of 1 lemon

2 teaspoons of Dijon mustard

1 tablespoon of honey

sea salt and pepper

¾ cup of grapeseed oil

Combine everything but your oil along with a pinch of salt and pepper in a jam jar, and give it a shake so everything combines. Let this rest for 10 minutes or so. Add the grapeseed oil, and taste for seasonings.

**Cowgirl Tip:** *When making vinaigrettes, let your own taste be your best guide. Add about half of the oil, shake it up, and add a bit more until you strike the right balance of oil and vinegar. I like*

*my dressings slightly more vinegary, so I use less oil; you might like more oil.*

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