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The Cowgirl Chef: From Paris with love, y'all

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ARTICLE PHOTOS (4) COMMENTS

BY ELLISE PIERCE

Special to the Star-Telegram

Editor's note: Popular Star-Telegram food columnist Ellise Pierce's first cookbook, Cowgirl Chef (Running Press, \$25), hits bookstore shelves Tuesday. We asked the Denton native to write about how her life became a column and how her column became a cookbook. She also shares some of her favorite recipes.

PARIS -- I did not wake up one morning and say to myself, "A cookbook! I must write a cookbook!"

Nor did I ever imagine that I would fall in love with a Frenchman, move to Paris...and then not like it. At all.

J'ai detesté Paris. See? Look how great my French is now. I can actually just think, "I hated Paris," and there it goes, coming out in French. Just like that.

Five years later, y'all.

Five. *Difficile.* Years.

So before you get to the "How could she not like Paris?" business in your head, let me just fill you in a little. Paris and I go way back. We have known each other -- intimately -- for decades. I got engaged here and got married north of the city in the very sweet town of Senlis back in the late '80s. And I've spent years traveling around France and loved it to pieces.

But it's a whole different story when you are in your 40s, sell your dream house, and leave behind all of your lifelong friends and family...and as you are unpacking the boxes that have finally arrived a couple of months later, you realize that perhaps this wasn't the best idea after all. The guy who you moved across the pond for is no longer wooing you with boxes of chocolates and fancy dinners. You are arguing over which shelf the drinking glasses should go on and how the garbage sack will be stuffed in the can. Right off the bat.

But you are not a quitter, so you stay.

Then, the magazines you work for stop calling. Or they just shut down. And you run out of money. And homesickness sets in like a bad head cold that you can't get rid of.

I missed my family. My friends. The spaciousness of Texas and its endless blue skies and the relentless,



View photos

Ellise Pierce 'Cowgirl Chef' appearances

2 p.m. Saturday
Barnes & Noble, 2201 I-35 E. South, Denton

2 p.m. June 2
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sunglasses-required-each-day sunshine. And I really missed the food.

So I went into my subterranean Mini-Me-size Paris kitchen and started making everything I craved...salsas, guacamole, tortillas, tacos. The more I cooked, the better I felt. Someone suggested I turn my Tex-Mex obsession into a catering and cooking-class business, and because I was dead-broke and I couldn't think of anything else to do, I thought, "OK. Why not?" My plan was to make enough money to move back home.

I never did. A funny thing happened after that. *J'ai commencé à aimer Paris, et beaucoup.* My business took off, and I started making friends. Even the city itself seemed friendlier somehow. The butcher flirted with me. The herb man always threw in an extra bundle of mint. I got free coffees at my neighborhood Starbucks (still do).

I began writing again. I wrote recipes and stories, and I posted them on a blog site I called Cowgirl Chef. Then, I started writing Cowgirl Chef columns for publications back home, including this one. I spent my days and nights cooking, writing about cooking and thinking about what I was going to cook next.

Someone suggested I write a cookbook, which still seemed like a silly idea, but I put together a proposal anyway...just to see what it would look like on paper.

After I wrote down all of my ideas and recipes, I realized my friend was right. I thought, "I absolutely must write a cookbook," but one that's different from anything else -- one with stories about my life here in Paris, along with recipes that are either inspired by my life here or from my life back home, or a mashup of the two.

That was two years ago.

I fired my old agent and hired a new one -- one who specializes in cookbooks and represents some of the biggest names in the industry. She and I worked together for months until the proposal was in shape.

A year later, the book sold.

Then, of course, I panicked. (Well, I drank some Champagne to celebrate...then I panicked.)

Nine chapters, more than 100 recipes, all of which needed to be tested, and each one with a story. The usual time frame for a book of this size: a year to a year and a half. I had four months to pull this off. What was I thinking?

My boyfriend, Xavier, was thrilled about this, of course, because it meant that I would be cooking even more than I usually did. This is a man who was eating slices of packaged ham and shredded carrots out of a plastic container and calling it dinner when I met him. Or he would boil up a few eggs and eat them, smashed up in a bowl with a squirt of Sriracha sauce. His apartment always smelled like just-boiled eggs.

A year or two after we began living together, he got so used to the nightly multicourse dinners that I would prepare that he would complain if I'd left a course out. "No dessert?" he'd say on those few evenings when I had not had the time to make a cake, a soufflé, or a tart of some sort, from scratch. Or if I had made a soup and not fancied it up with a batch of add-ins (homemade croutons, roasted veggies, toasted nuts or a little tartine with melty cheese on the side), he would give me a frown, like I had left something off of his order. "There's nothing else?" he would say, disappointed.

He whined about "too many tomatoes," when I was testing tomato tarts, gratins and soups, something I will never understand. (In my world, you can't have too many tomato-anything.) Plus, he refused to eat beets, cauliflower (except when it was well-hidden and he didn't know about it), broccoli, goat cheese, green olives, peanut butter or anything with lemon or lime.

On the other hand, he happily consumed just about anything with leeks, potatoes, mushrooms, cream, eggs or any kind of cheese (except the goat cheese).

He was helpful, too, if only to boost my morale, which rose and fell with that day's successes or failures. When I made four types of meatloaf one Saturday, he declared all of them "the best I've ever had," even though he had never had meatloaf before, and referred to it as pâté. He ate it, day after day, until it was gone. And the brown butter walnut cakes? They lasted less than 12 hours. (I helped.)

By the end of the summer, we had both gained more than a few kilos. My once-baggy "boyfriend" jeans were tight...and in all the wrong places.

But I had a manuscript.

Last fall, I was either waiting for proofs or proofreading the pages, time and time again, with more coffee and more sugar than I thought it possible to consume. Remember what finals week in college was like? That looming stress of certain failure? It was like that. Every day. For almost nine months.

The very next day after I turned the book in, I knew that I needed to do something else, something new to get my mind off of it all.

I slipped my laptop into my bag, twisted my scarf around my neck, walked to my neighborhood Starbucks and ordered my usual double-tall latte. Then I sat down and began writing a proposal for a second Cowgirl Chef cookbook. I'm turning it in to my agent this week.

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NEWS FROM TV GUIDE

Brown butter walnut cakes (Financiers aux Noix)

After trying something similar at a market in Paris one weekend, I bought a big sack of walnuts, hit the kitchen and started testing recipes. Made with beurre noisette (browned butter), more walnuts than you could ever imagine and a bit of sugar, these little cakes should come with warning labels. (I'm serious, y'all. These are the reason my jeans no longer fit.)

2 sticks butter, plus more for buttering the muffin tin

5 ounces walnuts, toasted and finely ground

1 cup sugar

1/2 cup flour

1/2 teaspoon sea salt

6 egg whites

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees and generously butter a 24 mini-muffin tin.

2. To make the brown butter, melt your butter in a saucepan over low heat until it turns brown and begins to smell nutty -- the butter should gurgle bubbles. This'll just take about 10 minutes. Whatever you do, don't try and rush this or you'll end up with burned butter. Once it is brown and nutty, pour the butter into a bowl and let cool.

3. In the mixer bowl, mix together the walnuts, sugar, flour and sea salt. Add the egg whites and mix well. Add the brown butter, and mix just until it comes together -- don't overdo. Scoop the batter into the greased muffin tin, filling three-quarters full. Bake 10 to 15 minutes, or until the edges start to brown and the little cakes' tummies rise up out of the pan. Flip the pan over, whack it on your countertop, and the cakes should fall right out. Serve immediately -- these are best the day you make them.

Nutritional analysis per muffin: 150 calories, 11 grams fat, 11 grams carbohydrates, 3 grams protein, 21 milligrams cholesterol, 131 milligrams sodium, trace dietary fiber, 64 percent of calories from fat.

Tex-Mex meatloaf

1 pound ground chuck (15 percent fat content)

1 pound ground pork

1/2 cup quick-cooking oatmeal

1 carrot, grated

1 egg

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 onion, chopped

3 jalapeños (fresh is best, but in Paris, I use pickled), finely chopped

1 1/2 tablespoons chili powder

1 teaspoon cumin

1/2 teaspoon chipotle-chile powder

2 heaping tablespoons tomato paste

1 teaspoon onion powder

1 teaspoon each sea salt and pepper

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

2. Put everything in your biggest bowl and smooch ingredients with your hands -- it's the only way to do this. Shape mixture into a loaf, and fit it into a 10-by-4-inch loaf pan. Bake for 1 hour and 15 minutes, or until the internal temperature of the loaf reads 160 degrees.

3. Remove from oven and cover loosely with a foil tent for 10 to 15 minutes. Slice and eat, while still warm -- and be sure to save some for sandwiches.

Nutritional analysis per serving, based on 8: 350 calories, 25 grams fat, 8 grams carbohydrates, 22 grams protein, 110 milligrams cholesterol, 367 milligrams sodium, 2 grams dietary fiber, 65 percent of calories from fat.

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