



PARIS/TEXAS

Courtesy photo

Homesick expat mashes up cuisines to become the Cowgirl Chef

By Nancy Franke
For the Denton Record-Chronicle

How do you comfort yourself when you find yourself 5,000 miles from home, without a job, in a country where you don't know anyone and can't speak the language? Longtime Denton resident Ellise Pierce moved five and a half years ago from Texas to Paris, France, for the best of reasons: romance.

She figured she could easily transport her freelance writing career, and she and her boyfriend, known as X (Pierce's name for him in her blog), wanted to be together.

Paris is the city of love and delicious food, but Pierce longed for the particular flavors from home — like the low-fire taste of chipotle, the dusty topnotes of hickory and the full-bodied heft of cornmeal.

To console herself, Pierce began to cook the food she had known and loved back in Texas.

"The whole process began with what I call 'homesick cooking,'" she said. "There's such a connection between food and memories. If we've had a comfort food, we can comfort ourselves with that food. You can put yourself in that place in a snapshot of your life."

Throughout her childhood, Pierce would come home from school and go straight to the kitchen

to bake or to help her mother with dinner. Because of this early connection with food, she says always felt at home in any kitchen anywhere in the world. When she felt lost in Paris, she found herself again in the kitchen.

Her unique blend of Southern, home-style and Tex-Mex cooking also proved comforting to other expats, and Cowgirl Tacos, her catering and cooking class business, evolved. Her Cowgirl Chef blog followed, as did her syndicated column of the same name, now distributed to newspapers throughout the U.S. And this month, *Cowgirl Chef: Texas Cooking With a French Accent* is hitting the shelves at bookstores.

Inevitably, French influences crept into her cooking repertoire. Pierce learned to substitute French ingredients for ones readily available in the U.S. She found ways to substitute new vegetables for ones she had known, and how to put

IF YOU GO

Ellise Pierce has a series of discussions and book-signings slated while she's back home:

- 2 p.m. May 12 at Barnes & Noble Booksellers Denton, 2201 S. Interstate 35E
- 2 p.m. June 2 at the Southern Methodist University bookstore, 3060 Mockingbird Lane in Dallas
- 1 p.m. June 3 at the Texas Christian University campus bookstore, 2950 W. Berry St. in Fort Worth

a Cowgirl Chef spin on French dishes. The cookbook chapter "Cowgirlified Frenchy," for example, contains recipes for Cowgirl Quiche, Cornbread Madeleines and Peanut Butter-Chocolate Souffles. In "Riding Side Saddle: Veggies," *courgettes farcies* become stuffed zucchini.

France offers a huge selection of pork, a good selection of lamb, "tons of chicken of all colors," plentiful and cheap salmon, but very little beef. She was never able to get the concept of brisket across to her butcher.

Each recipe in the cookbook sparked a memory or two, many of them centered on Denton.

See COWGIRL on 5D

A TASTE OF 'COWGIRL CHEF'

From Ellise Pierce's *Cowgirl Chef: Texas Cooking With a French Accent* (Running Press):

ZUCCHINI-CILANTRO SOUP

Makes 4 to 6 servings
Olive oil
1 shallot, finely chopped
1 potato, peeled and cubed
4 large zucchini (about 2 pounds), cut into fat slices, and 1 medium zucchini, cut into fat sticks about 2 inches long
2 cups of **Save Your Scraps! Veggie Stock** or **Skin & Bones Chicken Stock**, or you may use store-bought
sea salt and pepper
1 bunch of cilantro with stems
6 **Oven-Roasted Tomatoes**, chopped
4 to 6 tablespoons of fresh goat cheese
a handful of toasted slivered almonds
Pour a little bit of olive oil into a soup pot, toss in the minced shallots, and turn the heat to medium-low. Cook for a few minutes, just until the shallots become translucent. Add your potatoes, 2 cups of water, and cover. Cook until the potatoes begin to soften, about 10 minutes. Now, toss in your zucchini slices, the 2 cups of vegetable or chicken stock, a good pinch of salt and pepper, and turn the heat to low. Keep your pot covered, and let this go until the zucchini softens, not more than 10-15 minutes.

While the soup's cooking, roast your zucchini sticks. Preheat the oven to broil. Put the zucchini pieces onto a parchment-lined cookie sheet and toss with a bit more olive oil. Sprinkle with salt and pepper, and slide this into the oven for 10-15 minutes, making sure to flip the zucchini pieces over about halfway through.

Add the cilantro to the soup pot, and either puree the soup with your hand blender, or, if you want it super-smooth like I do, use your blender. Taste for seasonings, and serve warm in bowls with a few pieces of roasted zucchini, and about a tablespoon of each: chopped oven-roasted tomato, fresh goat cheese and roasted slivered almonds.

Cowgirl Tip: To make zucchini sticks, simply cut off the end and bottom of your zucchini, then slice it into 2-inch/5 cm chunks. Now, cut each one of these in half, making two fat half-moons. Put each one on the cutting board, flat-side down, and slice your zucchini into small "sticks."

SAVE YOUR SCRAPS! VEGGIE STOCK

Makes about 4 quarts
1 (1 quart) plastic bag filled with scraps (carrot tops and peellings, onion tops and bottoms, celery leaves, zucchini tops and bottoms, or whatever you've collected)
3 bay leaves
20 peppercorns
A few sprigs of fresh herbs, such as thyme, basil, parsley
5 quarts of water
A big pinch of sea salt
Put everything in a large stockpot and bring this to a boil. Cover, turn the heat down to a simmer, and cook for 4 hours. Taste, and add more salt if needed (or you may simply leave out the salt if you'd rather). Strain the stock through a piece of cheesecloth, set over a colander on top of a large bowl. Let your stock cool completely.

SKIN & BONES CHICKEN STOCK

Makes about 4 quarts
1 to 2 chicken carcasses
5 quarts of water
1 onion, quartered
1 carrot, peeled and halved
1 celery stalk, halved
About 20 peppercorns
3 bay leaves
5 sprigs of fresh thyme
5 sprigs of fresh parsley
Sea salt
Get out your biggest stockpot and throw in your chicken carcasses, along with any other bits that you've kept in the freezer, such as backs, feet and wings. Cover with 5 quarts of water, and turn the heat on high. Once this boils, carefully skim off the foam (not the fat, which will give the stock great flavor). Add the onion, carrot, celery, peppercorns, bay leaves, thyme and parsley (which you can tie together with a string if you want to be neat — I usually just throw it all in) and a big pinch of salt. Loosely cover, turn the heat down to a simmer, and let this cook for 5 hours. Towards the end, taste, and if you need to add a bit more salt, this is the time (or you may skip the salt altogether). Strain through a piece of cheesecloth pressed into a colander, and let cool.

OVEN-ROASTED TOMATOES

6 1/2 pounds of Roma tomatoes, halved and cored
Olive oil
Sea salt and pepper
Herbes de Provence
Preheat your oven to 200 degrees, and put your tomato halves, insides-up, on two foil-lined cookie sheets. Drizzle with a good bit of olive oil, and then sprinkle with sea salt, pepper and herbes de Provence. Pop into the oven and bake overnight, or for about 8 hours, until they're wrinkly and soft.

'Hearts' reveals another Norah

By Chris Talbott
AP Entertainment Writer

AUSTIN — Norah Jones has a piano in her kitchen.

You need look no further than this wonderfully off-kilter fact for a metaphor to describe the 33-year-old singer's evolution as she releases arguably the most interesting album of her career, *Little Broken Hearts*.

"It's nice because I have a music room, but you know it's like the office you never go in or the dining room you never go in or something," Jones said

with a laugh. "So I ended up putting this funky old piano in my kitchen and it's great."

Jones didn't set out to put a piano in her kitchen, of course. Much like her collaboration with the producer Danger Mouse on *Little Broken Hearts*, it just kind of happened naturally. And by going with the flow, making little decisions in the moment, she arrived at something delightful she never expected.

See JONES on 6D



Singer Norah Jones, shown last month in New York, has just released her fifth solo album, *Little Broken Hearts*. "I just like how it's turned into sort of a bit of a concept album without any intentions of that's what we were going to do," she says of the record.

AP/Charles Sykes