



Ready, set, blog!: Foodies online really cookin'

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EDMONTON - Blog: Contraction for weblog; refers to an ongoing conversation or diary, composed online.

It's the newest thing for food lovers, and it crosses all traditional lines and borders.

They call it food blogging, and it's coming to a rapid boil: personal websites created by individuals who are crazy about food and cooking. They enter contests, share information, and just chat online about all things edible: finding it, cooking it, eating it.

After five years of immersing herself in the vibrant food culture of Melbourne, Australia, Lynette Stanley-Maddocks moved to Edmonton and started blogging just before Christmas, last year.

"I'm a practising lawyer, but I love food. I guess you could say I'm obsessed with it," she says. "My letters home were all about the food in Australia, and it seems that if I wasn't writing about it, I was talking about it, probably boring my friends to death."

So it goes for those of us who are obsessive foodies. We know there's a disinterested rabble out there who couldn't care less about a wide-ranging discussion of the origin of cassoulet, yet we, on the other hand, find it utterly captivating.

Stanley-Maddocks, who has given up on the mindless drivel of reality television, ("I can feel the IQ points dripping out my ears,") spends about 10 hours a week blogging, plus all the prep time, the cooking and the photography. It costs about \$15 per month in fees to host her blog.

She's a more-than-capable writer, and enjoys the mental stimulation of turning food experience into essays, deconstructed recipes, restaurant reviews and general observations at lexculinaria.com.

Her recent posts (that's blog talk for an entry) include an article on fiddleheads as vegetables while living in Lac LaRonge, with a recipe and two photographs; a diary-style entry on a Saturday cooking saga, including breakfast at Culina, shopping at the Old Strathcona farmers market (with photo), a trip to Edseland Bison ranch (with photo), hanging out with some new calves (with photo), and a supper of lamb shanks with a ragout of cannellini beans (with photo and recipe); a restaurant review of La Tapa; a fascinating experiment in making her own camembert cheese (with photos); and another review, this one of Culina.

Here's the amazing bit: Once she's posted an item on her blog, responses will come from the most unexpected people and places -- a chef in New York, a blogger in France. (Some blogs don't have comment/response sections, but many food blogs do.) One dedicated blogger explains: "Blogging creates a model of feedback and discussion unprecedented in the history of the printed word, unless you count serialized graffiti discourse in public restrooms, which at one time was very big."

Food blogs aren't just recipe sites, or even newsletters. Many use recipes almost as an afterthought or not at all. Bloggers love to discuss food at length, and they look forward to responses.

Some blogs are better than others. Some are boring, badly written or simply in need of an editor. Others are witty, informative, timely and so well written and photographed that you'll have to tear yourself away. One New York blogger, Julie Powell, was so good that her site had over 700,000 hits. She did it by cooking her way through Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, while living in a tiny apartment with a mini-kitchen. Her persistent, well-written blog landed her a book deal with Little Brown and Co., and her book will be out before Christmas.

Blogs range from the sublime to the ridiculous. There's even a blog called *Dead Man Eating* that records last food requests by prisoners on death row in various U.S. prisons, along with lurid tidbits about their backgrounds and the crimes that put them there.

"Looking for a killer meal? Try www.deadmaneating.com for the latest in the world of the death penalty," says the blog blurb.

OK, I admit it, I was curious, in a ghoulish sort of way. A quick visit to the site indicated that many last suppers involve fried chicken. One prisoner, about to be electrocuted, ordered fried chicken legs, fried pork chops, french fries and barbecued ribs, with peach cobbler and a banana for afters.

One Google expert suggests that there are several million food blogs available somewhere, but Paul McCann of Kiplog -- essentially, a blog that lists other food blogs -- (www.kiplog.com/food) estimates something closer to 600, and growing. It may take a couple of hours of checking different blogs to find one that suits you.

As Stanley-Maddocks will tell you, there's more to food blogging than reading and writing. She enters contests.

"We'll all create a recipe, and blog on it. Or we'll nominate random ingredients, and create individual recipes with them. Some are just bizarre, others are fantastic. We stew over them all weekend, create a recipe, test it, photograph it and post it on Monday .

"You might think your ideas are just crazy, but Monday you'll find that somebody else had the same basic idea and did something fantastic with it."

A recent contest out of Paris, France, involved two ingredients -- lamb and peas. The judges were all Michelin-starred chefs, and the winner did a crispy-skinned lamb with sweet green pea and ginger gelato.

"Brilliant," murmurs Stanley-Maddocks. "Just brilliant."

Usually there are no prizes.

"Just the satisfaction of the communication," she says. "In the food blogging community, we talk to each other all the time. When I posted my piece about making camembert, chef Matt Kantor from Tangerine, a New York restaurant, replied. Now we talk about cheese."

Stanley-Maddox has the only food blog in western Canada today, but that could change overnight.

"San Francisco is a hotbed of activity, with some high-profile people. The animation specialist for *The Matrix*, Sam Breach, is a blogger," she says. "Mostly restaurant reviews, but still ..."

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HERE ARE A FEW BLOGS TO GET YOU STARTED.

www.lexculinaria.com

www.chocolateandzucchini.com

www.tastingmenu.com

www.deadmaneating.com

Ran with fact box "Here are a Few Blogs to Get You Started.", which has been appended to this story.

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