

Going blog wild

Web logs feed appetites for food information and inspiration

- Amanda Berne, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, March 9, 2005



It's 6 p.m. Dinnertime for families everywhere, and Guy Prince's family is no exception.

Tri-tip sizzles on the grill while his wife and kids hungrily wait. But here the familiar scene takes an unusual turn: In Prince's home, the kids trip around floodlights and tripods, while Prince takes another five minutes to get a stellar photo of the big roast for his other responsibility -- Meathenge, his 2-year-old food blog.

"What you see on Meathenge is what my family is eating," says Prince, a 40-year-old techie from Richmond who blogs on the side. "It's a fun place where people can go to not have to pay attention to what's going on in the world."

That sums up the essence of food blogging.

Blogs, short for Web logs, are online journals, places where Web surfers can find information on specific topics or, simply, be voyeurs into someone else's life. There's hardly a media outlet that hasn't covered the rise in blog popularity, and the question of whether bloggers are the same as journalists is a hot news topic these days.

Every day, more blogs are being created or abandoned. But, unlike the diaries of our youth, equipped with lock and key, these journals are open to anyone who wants to read them.

If you want to see someone's grocery lists, there's a blog waiting for you; if it's recipes you're after, or a tip on the hottest new restaurant, there are hundreds. With the number of hardcore foodies living in the Bay Area, new food and wine blogs pop up constantly. Food blogs let people connect and share one another's cultures, even if they only live a mile apart.

Some blogs have become so sophisticated that it's hard to differentiate them from online publications. Many food bloggers accept advertising, request books to review from publishing companies and provide professional-looking pictures for each recipe.

But most bloggers aren't food professionals. They're the food-obsessed who have bent one too many of their friends' ears with a list of what they ate and where, or the budding photographers who find beauty in a hunk of meat.

Food bloggery is a worldwide phenomenon. From Paris comes the blog *Chocolate & Zucchini*; *Noodle Pie* is eating his way through Saigon; and *A Movable Feast* chronicles work in the kitchen of Spain's *El Bulli*.

Bay Area bloggers

Among the best-known Bay Area food blogs is Chez Pim, written by a high-tech worker who's an accomplished cook and puts her own recipes online, including the one for Crispy Rice Cakes With Prawn & Peanut Dip (see recipe). Gastronomie's writer weaves tales of food and wine among her recipes, and contributed her interpretation of a family recipe, a lush green herb stew (see recipe). The blog 101 Cookbooks is dedicated to testing recipes from the author's extensive collection, complete with personal anecdotes. Other blogs offer restaurant reviews and wine notes (see list on Page F5).

Just like any other resource, food blogs should be tested against your own palate to find out whether they'll work for you. If you know you like the restaurants that Becks & Posh lists, then chances are that's a good site to go for a restaurant recommendation.

Many bloggers are dedicated to keeping their pages fresh, both because it gives them a creative outlet as a counter to their day jobs, and also because they feel a responsibility and connection to their readers, whether they have 30 or 5,000.

Information and inspiration

"I love food, and I am always looking for bright ideas about food and where to eat," says Janel Monribo, 24, a San Francisco art student and an avid reader of local food blogs.

"Blogs are kind of like TV, except they're always there when you want it, and you never miss anything," she says. She's canceled her cable.

For the bloggers, too, posting is something they squeeze into their days, grabbing any minute of down time.

Guy Prince posts new entries two to three times a week even though he has a busy family life with his wife, Meredith, and two children, Zachary, 9, and Elijah, 4. Between Cub Scouts, Junior Rangers and a full-time job, he manipulates images and writes his post, spending about an hour each time.

San Franciscan Amy Sherman, 40, is the blogger behind Cooking With Amy, which provides restaurant reviews, ingredient discussions and recipes, with a good mix of history and culture tossed in. A marketing consultant by day, Sherman aspires to be a food writer, and blogging is her answer.

"You know how they say men are always thinking about sex," she says. "Well, I'm always thinking about food."

Sherman's recipes are well-written, and she spends a lot of time developing them. Her Over The Top Chocolate Chip Oatmeal Cookies (see recipe) tested beautifully in The Chronicle test kitchen.

Sherman's devotion to her blog has not gone unnoticed. Prompted by her fascination with Jacques Pepin, Sherman once posted a link to the KQED food page, which features the famous chef. Marketing executives at the public media outlet noticed a burst of visitors coming to their site from her blog. They tapped Sherman to post weekly on KQED's new Bay Area Bites blog.

Blogs are attracting the kind of marketing attention once dedicated to TV, magazines and newspapers. When the movie "Sideways" came out, all of the major Bay Area food bloggers

were hit with publicity e-mails, offering free screenings and asking them to review the movie on their sites.

Computer programmer Derrick Schneider, 34, of Oakland, also aspires to become a food writer, which is one of the catalysts for his 3-year-old blog, *An Obsession With Food*. That, and the fact that his tech-minded friends were sick of reading his food-obsessed e-mails.

Schneider learned to cook from magazines and classes; it didn't take him long to learn how to whip up terrines or torchons. *An Obsession With Food* is where he shares his know-how, with a big dose of personality.

Two other popular food bloggers, Pim Techamuanvivit of *Chez Pim* and Sam Breach of *Becks & Posh*, are recent transplants to the Bay Area who found blogging to be a creative way to keep in touch with friends and family thousands of miles away. And, food was the perfect conversational vehicle.

Bangkok native Techamuanvivit, 35, started *Chez Pim* as personal postings about her life, after moving to San Francisco in 2000. At first, her audience numbered 35. By 2003, *Chez Pim* had morphed into a food-focused blog that Techamuanvivit still tries to keep very personal. Now the blog gets up to 5,000 hits, or viewings, a day.

The blogging omnivore

Chez Pim follows Techamuanvivit's adventures as she travels the world for work and pleasure, and her absolute passion for all things food couldn't be any more obvious.

"I eat everything from taco trucks to French Laundry," says Techamuanvivit. "Sometimes in the same day." And when she's not eating out, she's often cooking in, making the Thai dishes she pines for from recipes she's collected from her family.

"I've spent hundreds of dollars in phone bills calling our cook in Bangkok," she says.

Techamuanvivit can attest that chefs are paying at least some attention to blog reviews. After she recently posted a partially negative review of *Campton Place*, chef Daniel Humm sent her a note asking her to come back to try it again.

Sam Breach, 38, of *Becks & Posh* reviewed *Tabla*, an Indian-inspired cafe in Larkspur, and was shocked when chef Kyle Fehr thanked her the next time she was in the restaurant.

Becks & Posh started when Breach moved to San Francisco from London for a job as a 3-D effects artist at *Industrial Light and Magic*. She had never read a blog, but started one after a co-worker suggested it would be a great place to write about the restaurants she was always talking about. She mixes in recipes and tales of her adventures with food.

Creating community has been a big motivator for the bloggers. It's not about competition; they link to one another and comment on each other's recipes and reviews. In the past year, they've gotten together for potlucks, food show excursions and trips to the market.

Among the bloggers' favorite sites to read are cookbook author/food photographer Heidi Swanson, 31, who writes *101 Cookbooks*, and Alder Yarrow, 30, who does *Vinography*. Swanson produces a stunning blog focused on recipe testing, food styling and photography, which shows off her visual arts background. Her theory is that once you have 100 cookbooks,

it's time to stop buying and start cooking. It makes perfect sense that she ended up writing her own cookbook, the vegetarian Cook 1.0 (Stewart, Tabori & Chang), with the same delicate styling that's on her blog.

Vinography, Yarrow's blog, is filled with wine-tasting notes, winemaker stories and restaurant reviews. For Yarrow, a high-tech consultant, the year-old blog started as a way to support his note-taking habit when he tasted wines, since he says he has a "bad memory for that kind of stuff."

"Because it is not for profit, I write how I would want to read," Yarrow explains about his easily digestible style. That's not to say that he would frown at making money from something he loves. "If tomorrow I could make \$100,000-\$200,000 blogging, great, I'd do it."

Some bloggers reach out to their peers to create awareness in a mainstream market or for fund-raising.

After the recent tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia, Techamuanvivit asked a few popular food blogs to contribute a Southeast Asian-inspired recipe to her Menu for Hope. The menu went up on sites worldwide with a link for donations. They raised about \$1,500.

"We create blogs because we have fun and are providing entertainment," she says. "We should be able to ask for help."

Burning blogs

Bay Area bloggers link to the international community through online food events, such as the virtual potluck Is My Blog Burning? (IMBB), created by an Italian blogger living in Germany. Each month a different host selects an ingredient. Bloggers everywhere create recipes using that ingredient, post on their blogs, and send the link to the host, who then puts all the links on one online page, often with a sentence or two about each dish.

"It's a really nice community thing that allows everyone to see different cultures and ideas," says Schneider.

IMBB has inspired contests with names such as Wine Blogging Wednesdays, Sugar High Fridays and Paper Chef.

"Blogging as a whole is getting better, with more of a two-way communication," Meathenge's Prince says. "The whole point of the Internet is to get out there and meet people."

That's great, but we know it's really about the food.

Bay Area blogs

These bloggers update content often, keeping it fresh and timely, and often provide useful cooking, wine and eating out tips.

101 Cookbooks, 101cookbooks.com. Recipes, with stories.

An Obsession With Food, obsessionwithfood.com. Recipes, cooking technique, wine notes, food stories.

Becks & Posh, becksposhnosh.blogspot.com. Recipes, restaurant reviews, adventures in food.

Chez Pim, chezpim.typepad.com.

Recipes, restaurant reviews, adventures in food.

Cooking With Amy, cookingwithamy.blogspot.com. Recipes, food anthropology, ingredient descriptions, restaurant reviews.

Gastronomie, gastronomie-sf.com.

Recipes, food stories, wine notes.

Meathenge, cyberbilly.com/meathenge. All meat, all the time. Recipes, cooking technique, ingredient descriptions.

Saute Wednesday, sautewednesday.com. Food and wine news with commentary; dining guides.

Tomatilla!, tomatillo.com. Paper Chef competition and recipes.

Vinography, vinography.com. Wine notes, restaurant reviews, winemaker profiles.

How to start your own

Food blogs have proliferated as blog software has made creating a site as easy as boiling water. Bloggers no longer worry about the intricacies of HTML coding. And Web design? Forget about it. It's unnecessary.

Setting up a food blog is almost too easy.

Start by picking which blog software site is best for you. Two popular sites are Blogger (blogger.com) and Typepad (typepad.com).

Just to see how it works, I set up a sample site at Blogger. It took only a few minutes to set up an account, and then anyone on the Internet can see what, where and how you're eating.

Adding pictures is the trickiest part.

I had to set up a separate account on a photo server in order to post them.

Otherwise, a little writing or typing in

a recipe can take a mere five minutes from the log on point.

Of course, those five minutes don't count the hours of obsessing over cooking, eating and photographing the food, or thinking of how to write about it.

To see my example, visit imitationcrabmeat.blogspot.com.

-- Amanda Berne

Alder Yarrow

Vinography

vinography.com

Restaurant trend prediction:

I think you're going to start seeing even more high-end concept restaurants. I predict the waning of interest in Latin fusion, with a shift to fusions of a different sort: Indian, Cajun, Japanese, Spanish and Chinese.

Wine trend prediction: Wine will continue to grow in popularity and quality will improve. Some wine will be harder for Californians to get if the Supreme Court paves the way for interstate wine shipping and smaller wineries begin to allocate their productions nationwide. Chardonnay will eventually settle back down to reasonable levels of oak use, and there will be an increasing demand for unoaked Chardonnay.

Pim Techamuanvivit

Chez Pim

chezpim.typepad.com

Food trend prediction: Coming up next in the food world are niche blogging and niche forums, focusing, for instance, on three-star dining. The Internet will enable more serious, affluent and well-connected amateurs who dine at that level to congregate in these niche forums or have their own blogs, exchanging tips and reviews that are much fresher and more detailed than any publication's. Credibility of these reviews will not be a problem, as the community will be small enough for everyone to learn about each other's experience and palate. These niche blogs and forums likely never will have as big an influence on the public as food guides such as Michelin or Gault-Millau, or newspapers such as the New York Times and The Chronicle. But they are becoming a generator of buzz and excitement for up-and-coming restaurants, even among professional critics.

Sam Breach

Becks & Posh

becksposhnosh.blogspot.com

Food trend prediction: Exotic spices that we haven't even heard of yet, colors we haven't seen yet and smells and flavors we don't know what to do with -- yet.

Restaurant trend prediction: More small, friendly, local, drop-in places, with limited menus and blackboards with daily changing specials. The range won't be great, but what they serve will usually be excellent. Think Tabla, Pizzetta 211, Chez Maman.

I'd like to see lots of little complementary tastes on one plate. Not everyone can afford to go to Michael Mina to try his foie gras prepared six ways. I'd like to see chefs expand on and modernize ideas like the Indian thali, the Italian antipasto plate or Turkish mezze.

Guy Prince

Meathenge

cyberbilly.com/meathenge

On Food: Five or so years ago, natural and organic

produce and meat products weren't so available, but we had a good idea as to what organic was. Now that the USDA has come in and created some kind of monster, the certified organic food industry, who knows what the heck you're getting. My money is on the traditional organic farmers and ranchers. They need to get a council together and put together guidelines. Steer away from an 'industry.'

Crispy Rice Cakes With Prawn & Peanut Dip

This snack was a favorite of Pim Techamuanvivit's grandfather. Dried rice cakes and palm sugar can be found at most Asian markets; cilantro roots can be found at some stores or from farmers' markets. The bottom part of cilantro stems is an acceptable substitution.

INGREDIENTS:

Vegetable oil for frying + 3 tablespoons

1 10-ounce package dried rice cakes (also called instant sizzling rice)

1/2 pound shrimp, shells removed and reserved, deveined and chopped into small pieces

2 cups coconut milk

1 tablespoon chopped garlic

2 dried red chiles, soaked in warm water until soft, seeds removed and minced

1 teaspoon chopped cilantro roots or bottom part of stems

1 teaspoon whole white peppercorns

1 teaspoon kosher salt

1/2 pound ground pork

1/4 cup fish sauce

1/4 cup palm sugar

1/3 cup ground raw, skinless peanuts

1/4 cup thinly sliced shallots

A handful of cilantro leaves and a few chopped red chiles, for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS:

In a large frying pan, pour oil to a depth of 1 inch and heat over medium high. The oil is ready for frying when a piece of the rice cake sizzles and puffs up immediately when dropped into the frying pan. Fry the rice cakes, a few at a time, until golden on both sides, turning frequently to keep them from curling up too much. When crispy and golden, remove from the frying pan and drain on paper towels until serving time. The rice cakes can be fried up to a day ahead, cooled and stored in an airtight container until ready to use.

Heat 1 tablespoon of vegetable oil in a 3-quart saucepan. Add reserved shrimp shells and cook for a few minutes until the shells are pink. Add the coconut milk and simmer over low heat for 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, with a mortar and pestle, or in a food processor, puree the garlic, chiles, cilantro roots, white peppercorns and salt to a fine paste. Set aside.

After 15 minutes of simmering, strain the coconut milk, discarding the shrimp shells. Set the coconut milk aside. Wipe the saucepan clean.

Add the remaining 2 tablespoons of vegetable oil to the saucepan and warm over medium heat. Add the garlic-chile paste and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Be careful not to burn the paste.

Return the coconut milk to the saucepan. Add the ground pork, fish sauce and palm sugar. Cook for 3 minutes, stirring frequently, then add the chopped shrimp and cook another 2 minutes until the pork and shrimp are done.

Add the ground peanuts and the shallots. Cook for another minute or so to soften the shallots. Taste for seasoning.

Serve the fried rice cakes alongside the dip. Garnish with cilantro leaves and chopped red chiles, if desired.

Serves 6

PER SERVING: 660 calories, 22 g protein, 48 g carbohydrate, 44 g fat (19 g saturated), 79 mg cholesterol, 1,352 mg sodium, 3 g fiber.

OTT (Over the Top) Chocolate Chip Oatmeal Cookies

This recipe is from the [Cooking With Amy](#) blog.

INGREDIENTS:

1 cup all-purpose flour

1/2 teaspoon baking powder

1/2 teaspoon baking soda

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1/4 teaspoon nutmeg

2 cups rolled (old-fashioned) oats

1/2 cup walnut halves

8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature

1/2 cup lightly packed light brown sugar

1/2 cup granulated sugar

1 large egg

1/4 cup maple syrup

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

3/4 cup semisweet chocolate chips

1 cup dried cranberries

INSTRUCTIONS:

Preheat oven to 350°.

In a medium bowl, stir the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, oats and walnuts together in a bowl.

In a food processor fitted with a plastic blade, beat the butter, brown sugar, and granulated sugar together until blended, scraping the sides. Add the egg and continue to process until smooth and barely fluffy. With processor running, drizzle in the maple syrup and vanilla. Dump the mixture into the flour-oatmeal mixture. Blend just to combine, then fold in the chocolate chips and dried cranberries.

Using a tablespoon, drop balls of dough onto a nonstick or parchment-lined cookie sheet at 3-inch intervals. With moistened fingers, flatten and round out the cookies. Bake for about 9 minutes, turning the pan once for even baking. The cookies are done when they are lightly browned on top. Remove the cookies from the pan to cool on a rack.

Makes 4 dozen cookies.

PER COOKIE: 90 calories, 1 g protein, 13 g carbohydrate, 4 g fat (2 g saturated), 10 mg cholesterol, 33 mg sodium, 1 g fiber.

Ghormeh Sabzi (Persian Green Herb Stew)

This is a family recipe from Fatemeh Khatibloo-McClure of the Gastronomie blog. Persian limes and the fresh fenugreek leaves can be found at Middle Eastern markets and some

specialty stores. If only dried fenugreek is available, she recommends using a slightly lesser amount, but reconstituting the leaves in water first.

INGREDIENTS:

4 tablespoons canola oil

1 large yellow onion, finely chopped

1 teaspoon turmeric

1 1/2 pounds lamb stew meat or boneless chuck roast, chopped into 1 1/2- inch pieces

1 cup finely chopped green onions, green parts only

1/2 cup finely chopped Italian flat-leaf parsley

1/4 cup finely chopped cilantro leaves

1/4 cup finely chopped chives or scallion tops

1/4 cup finely chopped fresh fenugreek leaves

1 1/2 cups finely chopped spinach

1 1/2-2 cups water

Salt and pepper, to taste

Juice of 1 lemon

4-5 dried Persian limes

1 (14-ounce) can red kidney beans, drained

INSTRUCTIONS:

In a large frying pan, heat 2 tablespoons of the oil over medium-high heat. Add the yellow onion, and saute until deep golden brown. Add the turmeric, frying another minute or two, then add the stew meat. Toss well to coat in turmeric, and cook until the meat is browned well on all sides.

Meanwhile, heat the remaining 2 tablespoons oil in another pan over medium-high heat. Add the green onions, parsley, cilantro, chives, fenugreek and spinach and saute until they are fragrant and deep in color. Watch them carefully as they will turn bitter if burned. You want them to be a deep, dark green without blackening.

Add the greens to the meat and onion mixture, stirring well. Add the water (you want a "slurry" but not "soupy" mixture). Season to taste with salt and pepper (easy on the pepper). Add the lemon juice, turn the heat down, and simmer, covered, for 1 1/2-2 hours, or until the greens are mostly softened and the meat is getting very tender.

About an hour into the simmer, add the dried limes (any sooner and they will turn the stew bitter), submerging them into the liquid.

After the stew has simmered for 1 1/2-2 hours, add the kidney beans, and cook another 30 minutes. Check the seasonings. If more acidity is needed, squeeze the limes to release their juices, and then add lemon juice to taste.

Serve with rice or lavash bread.

Serves 6

PER SERVING: 340 calories, 30 g protein, 22 g carbohydrate, 16 g fat (4 g saturated), 77 mg cholesterol, 81 mg sodium, 7 g fiber.

E-mail Amanda Berne at aberne@sfgate.com.

Page F - 1

URL: <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2005/03/09/FDG00BJAGE1.DTL>