



Chef Christie Vanover of Zestuous appears on MasterChef Cookalong, June 2013

Local flavors

Chef Christie Vanover prepares for the World Food Championship in November

By Buford Davis | THP

Henderson's Christie Vanover spends her workday as a Park Ranger in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, providing public information from the National Park Service. Off the clock, she is a chef who is preparing to compete in the World Food Championship, hosted by Las Vegas in November.

Vanover's recipe blog, *Zestuous.com*, boasts 20,000 individual visitors each month. The Henderson Press sat down with the chef to discuss her work and the upcoming competition.

THP: Has cooking been a lifelong interest for you?

VANOVER: It has. In college, I really began experimenting with it. My husband's dad is an outstanding cook. He taught me a lot. He's the one who gave me the courage to cook. I would see a dish and was intimidated because I didn't think I could re-create

it. He taught me to trust my palette, sense of smell and got me thinking about sampling flavors and mixing them together.

THP: I'd describe your dishes, generally, as hearty, but with a complex flavor structure that often includes unexpected tastes. Is that a fair description?

VANOVER: I like that. I really try to give a pop of flavor that makes you say, 'what is that I just tasted? It's good, but there's something extra in it.'

My husband was in the army, and we traveled all over the world. Getting the chance to try all these new cuisines also inspired me.

THP: What is the most 'exotic' dish you've had the opportunity to sample?

VANOVER: I lived in South Korea for a few months and tried silkworms. They have push carts in (South) Korea. Instead of selling peanuts, they sell roasted silkworms. I tried it and (laugh-

ing) didn't care for it. I'll try anything.

THP: You also lived in Belgium. Tell us about Belgian cuisine.

VANOVER: One of the things people would be surprised about is that French Fries started in Belgium. They're actually Belgian fries. During World War I, American and Belgian soldiers were in an area and the Belgian soldiers prepared fried potatoes. The Americans called them French Fries because Belgian soldiers spoke French. The origin of the dish is that they used to deep-fry a type of skinny fish, but one winter the river froze over and they didn't have any fish. They cut up potatoes the same size as the fish and got fried potatoes.

THP: What types of cooking were you most exposed to growing up?

VANOVER: From seventh grade to college I grew up in Kentucky, so that's where my southern roots come in. I also lived in Mississippi and Texas.

THP: Tell us about your experience in the world of competitive cooking.

VANOVER: The World Food Championship is coming up in Las Vegas. There's a series of different qualifiers to get you in. I entered FoodChamps, and my sandwich won. That means I am now qualified and will compete in November in the sandwich division.

It's on Fremont Street. I will be in a ten-foot by ten-foot tent with a table. I'll bring my equipment and ingredients. You have 90 minutes to prepare your dish, plating it for four or five judges. That's how it was last year, at least.

THP: What was the sandwich?

VANOVER: A creamy Cognac steak sandwich. I believe it was because of the horseradish bacon and the asparagus slaw that has a bacon vinaigrette.

THP: How nerve racking is it to

prepare a dish during competition?

VANOVER: I like pressure. I'm OK with it, but it is nerve racking. Everything seems like it takes longer, you're not in your own kitchen.

THP: Do the competitions spur you to be more adventurous with your dishes?

VANOVER: Absolutely. It's challenging because you want to make a dish that's new and creative, but it can't be so different that you overpower it with complexity. Or that an average cook couldn't re-create it. Advice that one judge gave me is, 'just keep things simple, but find a way to make it interestingly simple.'

THP: You also participate in cookalongs. What are those?

VANOVER: When I was at the World Food Championships last year, I met one of the judges who had a show on Food Network called *Health Inspectors*, Chef Ben Vaughn. And I also met a woman named Beth Peterson, who was a competitor. I've worked with them on a cookalong.

The next event is Thursday (Aug. 8 at 8 p.m.). (Vaughn) is doing a four-course meal along with another chef. The final dish is going to be the dessert (Riesling poached pears atop pecan baklava). It's really good.

The agreement I wanted to have with him, was that I wanted to have the recipe in advance so I could give it to my followers on *Zestuous*. I did it step-by-step with pictures so they can now tune in live — it's going to be on Youtube (Google+) and on my website. It will be him in Chicago and me in Las Vegas. He'll be instructed people how to cook along and I'll be interacting with him and we'll be answering questions along the way.

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THP: Can you talk about your process of developing new recipes?

VANOVER: I will think of the flavor palette I want to go with. The steak sandwich for instance—I knew that I wanted to re-create an awesome steak dinner into a sandwich. I started with Filet Mignon and bacon. I like

using a creamy cognac sauce and mushroom. So I incorporated that into the dish. I like asparagus. I take those flavor palettes, taste the proportions and grow from there.

THP: Tell us about *Zestuous*.

VANOVER: I started the blog in 2010. My intentions at first were to just

document my recipes and give other people a source to find them. And now it's grown to almost 20,000 unique viewers a month. I do my own photography and designed the site myself.

THP: What are your future ambitions?

VANOVER: I want to publish

some cookbooks. I don't want to be famous. If I win some money in a food competition, that's great. But I just want to share food. If I can take something that I've learned and share it with others, and make them and their friends and family happy eating the food, that's my goal.



Prosecco mojito.



Pupusas (El Salvadorian grilled cheese)



Tomato bacon chowder with potato oyster crackers



Black cod courtbouillon with miso pilaf



Garlic Chile skirt steak with fresh green bean salsa and compound butter



Stuffed pancetta burgers with balsamic fig marmalade