

ladies of the ladle

profiling the lives of women in food & agric

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Georgeanne Brennan

Cookbook Author
Winters, California



It is no secret that I lived the first few years in Yolo County longing to be elsewhere. My mind was constantly escaping back to Europe or some fictional town in New England. But when I spent time with Georgeanne Brennan at her farmhouse in Winters, California I would leave feeling how special Yolo is. Georgeanne may be known for her connection to France, but to me she represents what makes this county such a rich and special place to live.

She and her husband, Jim run a small farm on the outskirts of town, where they grow everything from rare French olive varieties to rows and rows of delicious tomatoes. Georgeanne has authored countless cookbooks and always has a new project in the works. For a number of years she ran a cooking school at her house in Provence and then later at her home in California. I was lucky to help with some of these classes in Winters and loved how she made a weekend in Yolo County as special as an overseas vacation to the south of France. The community in Winters goes along with the setting created, reminding me of

a small European town - lively with people strolling to restaurants and bars and a great mix of young and old.

Georgeanne is a true storyteller. She has a Masters in History but found her way in food and agriculture.

Her books paint wonderful pictures of the stories behind the dishes we eat and how we eat them. I spent a relaxed afternoon at Georgeanne's asking questions I never had the opportunity for and watching her peel and select tiny favas for apertif. She showed off some recently cured prosciutto and talked about her new business adventure.



Tell me about your new business on the horizon?

I'm launching an on-line retail store called La Vie Rustic - Sustainable Living in the French Style for all things French in the categories of Potager, Orchard, Barnyard, Kitchen, and Tools. The store really pulls together all the knowledge I've acquired about the French style of living - a sustainable life with style and elegance, no matter the station in life, and all the work that I have done around this from my gardening and cookbooks, running a culinary vacation program in France and in Northern California, giving lectures - and, of course, living my own sustainable life both at my home in Provence and here in Northern California. My good friend and superstar graphic designer, Michael Schwab is doing the logo and packaging design. I've seen some of the initial designs and they reflect perfectly the sensibility of the products. I'm replicating, for example, a mid-19th century hand scythe that I bought in Lyon, just like the one my French neighbor Marie used when she cut alfalfa for her rabbits, or lavender for sachets. I'll use wood from my olive, black walnut, and pecan trees for the handles. I'm doing a collection of rubs that include one made with Violette de Bordeaux figs and Sel de Guerande. I've got a DIY Jambon Cru (known as prosciutto in Italy!) kit, Sultane de Marabout fig trees, made from cuttings from my mother

tree, Fresh Bay Laurel, and other products, including heirloom French Lettuce Seed Collection and one of French Chicories. I'm hoping to launch in September, right after Labor Day.



What is your earliest food memory?

This isn't my earliest, but one of my strongest. Tomato aspic with shrimp. I loved it and still do. Picking plums and eating them off the tree with my grandmother. Sitting on her porch and eating mustard and onion sandwiches on white bread. Chopped olive and cream cheese sandwiches for a birthday party. A gingerbread house that failed so we ate it.





What is your go to meal this time of year?

One of my top go to meals anytime of year is pasta with tomato sauce. So, coming up soon, it will be pasta with fresh tomato sauce and basil. And, salads of every kind.



What advice do you have for working mothers?

Be as inclusive as you can, don't not do something just because you have children- simply take them along. And have civilized, sit-down meals together. I took my daughter to Europe by myself when she was 1 1/2, and my husband and I traveled back and forth to Europe every summer, two children and usually two dogs in tow. The children helped me with my various projects from packing seeds to selling flowers, we went to museums, ballets, camping - all kinds of things - together. We also had a sit down dinner every night. OK - sometimes it was over the top, like the time I was determined to cook sweetbreads on a Wednesday night after teaching all day. We had a lot of mac and cheese, and one thing the children remember is the mutton we ate. We would buy one or two a year at the auction, then freeze it. Toward the end of the month we often ate a lot of mutton - but we also had a big vegetable garden in our front yard, so always vegetables. All of my children are excellent, creative cooks, and 2 of the 3 sons are the main cooks in their households.



Describe your personal style?

I generally like a casual European look mixed with a little California beach. I grew up in Laguna Beach and I love that carefree linen and sandals feel. I like earth tones, muddy pastels - not primary colors, but shades like rust, mauve, taupe, indigo, moss, black of course, grey. I like loose clothes that flow and drape a bit - sort of Annie Hall look without the hats. I usually buy all kinds of clothes at the markets in France, where everything seems perfectly to my tastes.



What are your favorite shoes?

I love a brand called [Vintage Re-Mix](#). They are a contemporary company based in LA that does replicas of shoes from the 30s and 40s. Peep-toe, wedges, great colors and super comfortable.

Your house is full of treasures. How would you describe your design style?

All the things in my house have some meaning for me, and it gives me pleasure every day to see them. I have lots of paintings, artifacts, toys, photographs, dishes that represent all the different pieces and parts of my life, from childhood on. My husband has given me some beautiful, special presents like a brass Russian lunch box, an oil burning banquet lamp, old candlesticks, a cut-glass pitcher with a silver lid and handle - all gets mixed in with flowers, photo albums, thousands of books and other stuff. My daughter recently said she thought I was going for a Miss Havisham look, but I don't think she's quite on the mark. At least I hope not!

I love the photo of your father surfing, can you tell me the story behind it?

My father was one of the first surfers in California in the 1930s and 1940s. One of his favorite spots to surf was 'Killer Dana' - Dana Point before they put the harbor in. The photo was taken by Doc Ball in the 40s of a huge wave, and he superimposed my father on it. The photo is in Doc Ball's book, *California Surfriders*, a limited edition published in 1946. The caption in the book for the photo says: "The wave, a thirty-foot bone-crusher, described in *Look Magazine* some years back, was taken at Long Beach. The



rider, "Nellie Bly" Brignell was riding a Dana Point grinder of about the same propositions. The job of super-imposing was a natural. This picture has caused more controversy than any other I possess." My father's nickname was Nellie Bly, for the Captain who sailed around the horn and was known, apparently as a dare-devil. My father was born with stretched retinas and wore very heavy glasses, which he fastened on while surfing with a thick rubber band.





How does your time in France influence your lifestyle?

I think it influenced me in every way - especially the way heirlooms are treasured but mixed with new pieces. The past mixes comfortably, side by side, with the present, all being a part of the moment. The way of eating - long, leisurely meals, enjoyed with family or friends or even alone. I love going out to my garden every morning, taking a tour, to see what to have for dinner, just like I do in France.

Georganne is clearly a doer. It only becomes more apparent to me as I get older that it is imperative to go for things in life. Jealousy and regret are the lazy man's drugs. If you have an idea, go for it.
-Nicole

Posted by Nicole Sturzenberger at [10:27 PM](#)



2 comments:



vthigpen June 10, 2014 at 11:15 PM

Nicole, you are such a gifted captor of amazing peoples' lives. Keep up the inspiring good work! Love, love!

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Katie Hayes June 11, 2014 at 8:56 AM

fun to read!!! I love the focus of your project!

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