WHAT: Ruth Reichl Interview
WHO: Bear Deluxe Magazine
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Setting the Table

Food critic and editor Ruth Reichl talks how far food has come the past 40 years
Interview by Catherine Cole

There are few more celebrated food personalities in America today than Ruth Reichl—the last print editor for *Gourmet* magazine and former food critic for such publications as the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. Known for her work challenging elitism in food circles, “democratizing” food—and not to mention her many wigs and disguises—Reichl is revered among foodies for her frankness among more highly starched food purveyors.

Fall 2010 will see a re-launch of America’s oldest food magazine, Reichl’s former employer. *Gourmet* was first published in 1941 and remained in print publication through November 2009. The news of its demise rippled through the food community, stunned readers and left editor Reichl to soak up the sadness while simultaneously assigned tour for *Gourmet Today*—the publication’s latest cookbook.

Associate editor Catherine Cole spoke with Reichl in August as the now at-large food critic and editor relaxed at a writer’s retreat in the woods of northern New Hampshire.

Where do you see the most dynamic overlap of food and culture? On the farm, at the table, in the restaurant?
It’s happening everywhere, but I think that restaurants are still out there. I think you have to think about the changing place of the restaurant in popular culture as being a little bit like the changing place of the museum. When I got out of graduate school in the history of art you’d go to a museum and there’d be nobody there because it was considered high-culture and it wasn’t popular culture, and restaurants were the same. They were places rich people went. And that’s changed enormously in both fields. I mean, now you go to New York and you go to the Museum of Modern Art and it’s packed with tourists who wouldn’t have been there 30-40 years ago. Restaurants have become a big part of popular culture. I think it’s where people learn to eat in America. You think about what chefs have done—the whole farmers’ market movement pretty much came out of chefs wanting good food and feeding people good strawberries at a time when nobody else could get them, then people going, ‘Wait a minute; if I can get this at Chez Panisse, why can’t I get this at home?’ You look at someone like Jamie Oliver, and increasingly chefs see their place as trying to change the food landscape.

Do you have any specific thoughts in regards to all the food carts?
Oh my God; it's amazing. The CIA, the Culinary Institute of America, they do a big industry event every year at their Greystone campus in the Napa Valley, and last year they did it on food carts. All these cart guys were there. It is the big food movement right now. It's kind of like what's happened with fashion. Fashion is now going from the street up—and food is doing that too. I think it's going to change food at all levels. The big food companies are going to the carts to look at what's the next trend. At the same time chefs are saying, 'Maybe I don't want to do a restaurant anymore—maybe I just want to be out there feeding people.'

The other day I saw a Taco Bell food cart. It was parked in their parking lot, but still…
Eww, that's not good. We don't want them to take this over.

How could "foodies" best advance their agenda at a national level? Should Michelle Obama be more vocal on some of these issues or has she struck the right balance?
I think she is doing exactly the right thing. The Michelle-effect is huge. I think that she does have the guts to go to these manufactures of food and say, 'Stop making our kids obese.' But she's been doing it under the radar in a way that's really good. You have this feeling that if she was too much more vocal the Tea Party would start attacking her, and start attacking the movement. She's going to the industry, which is great. She's getting chefs on her side; she had 500 chefs at the White House in June begging them all to please adopt a school. She's chosen to do it in a really smart way; nobody can accuse her, or anyone, for making this an elitist issue. She's very clear it's a class issue. I think she's been very smart about it. The only thing I'd like her to do that she's not doing is: I wish that she had a press secretary in the White House kitchen and was sending out recipes weekly. I think people would eat what they're eating in the White House.

Now that would be cool.
I think kids would eat it, if Sasha and Malia are eating it. Kids would say, 'They're eating vegetables, I can eat vegetables.' It would be such an easy thing to do. It wouldn't cost anything; you can't attack it.
Let me say one thing: There's so many awful things happening with food—obesity, the industrialization of food. You could go on and on and on about it, but the really heartening thing is how much it has come on the public radar. It's hard for me to believe it was only four years ago, but in 1996 I was invited to speak to the Newspaper Editorial Writers. I gave a speech where I begged them to think about food as a proper topic for them to editorialize. The idea of even giving that speech today? Ludicrous. That's how much things have changed in just four years.

How do you explain that?
I think that it got *so* bad we couldn't ignore it. When you're looking at the kind of obesity that you're looking at with kids, and you're looking at the diabetes crisis,

and the eggs, and the Bush years and the laxity in regulation—made things so much worse. Food changed so fast between 1960 and 2000; people didn't even realize what happened. If you look at even processed food—one of the early pieces we did that I really loved at *Gourmet* was a piece that Robert Sietsema wrote called "My Father the Formulator." His father invented Doritos. He worked for Frito-Lay. Ultimately he ended up leaving because he didn't like what they were doing to the fake food he'd invented. They were making it so much worse.

That says a lot.
It started affecting everybody. Everybody started to have allergies that they didn't use to have. It's very hard to ignore the fact that what we were eating really made a difference.

What's the difference between a food trend and a dire American diet change? Talk about gluten-free, for example.
It shocks me how many people now don't eat gluten. I'm sure it comes out of something we've been eating that has caused this, all these people who are gluten intolerant. I mean, when I grew up, everybody ate peanuts. And now half the kids in America are deathly allergic to peanuts. That came from somewhere. I think we're all understanding that we're basically a part of this incredible experiment of, 'Let them put anything they want into the food and we'll see where the chips fall.' And this is where the chips have fallen. Suddenly everybody's sick. I suspect that the end result of this will probably be good. This egg crisis is horrible that all these people got sick, but it's a good thing that everybody now understands how the eggs are being created. I sort of think that we have a very bad period to live through but the end result will be better.

Sometimes becoming vegan doesn't sound bad.
Yeah, great idea except that 80 percent of the soybeans, which end up becoming a big part of your diet if you're vegan, are grown with Roundup Ready soy. It's the least organic product there is; it's hard to find organic soybeans.

Gourmet's *newest version, Gourmet Live, do you have anything to do with that?*
I have nothing to do with it; I know nothing about it.

Describe what it was like for you as you saw Gourmet *being shut down.*
I was incredulous. It never crossed my mind that they would close the magazine. I was very saddened. We were a really tight staff and we were very proud of what we'd done. It was a time of terrible mourning. I also felt depressed about the fact that, you know, we had a sister publication and I was sorry that the magazine that was tackling more serious issues was the one that got to be closed. I felt like it was leaving a hole in the marketplace.

How do you answer the question, Why?
Oh, it's very simple. It was advertising. It was a magazine that relied upon luxury advertising. Our five biggest categories were travel, automotive, financial

institutions, jewelry and appliances. *All* of the advertising went away. It wasn't that the advertisers didn't like the magazine; it's just that they stopped advertising.

It seems as though there's still such a push for good-food media. Were you confused?
I was totally confused and I was not privy to any of the decisions; it was told to me, 'We're closing the magazine.' I was as baffled as anyone else.

What do you miss about the magazine and about the job?
I loved the job. We really were a very close staff, so I felt like I was losing my family partly. There was a wonderful sense of excitement of we can do anything, how do we push this? What are the new issues we should be tackling? We had wonderful, thoughtful writers who'd proposed really interesting articles and I'm really sorry they didn't get to see print.
I really thought that our creative director [Richard Ferretti] was charting new territory. The way he looked at food in a visual sense is a way that I don't think anybody had before and no one else is doing now. I think that's a real loss too. It's not just something we eat; it's a way of looking at the world.

Can you expand on his new approach to food visuals?
Basically, food magazines have always done pictures of food, of dishes, right? So you have a recipe for fried chicken and there's a picture of fried chicken. Richard's idea was that we would not shoot dishes; we would shoot a moment; we would shoot a feeling. It's a totally different approach. The idea being that we're actually trying to talk about not what the food is, and not necessarily show you what your result is going to be, but give you a reason to want to make the food.

Gourmet*'s photography had this richness, elegance unlike any other food publication. How'd he do that?*
Two reasons. One was, Richard wasn't using people who were food photographers. He was using photographers, a lot of whom had never shot food before. Which means you're coming at it from a completely different viewpoint. And photographers would tell me all the time that the difference between working for Richard and working for another art director was that other art directors told you exactly what they wanted, and if you didn't give it to them, they edited the pictures down to that. More photographers said to me, 'The only art director in the entire business who uses the pictures that I take spontaneously – I'll say, I think this is a good picture; it's not what you asked for. Nobody else uses those, but Richard does. He understands when I've really gotten something good.' And he doesn't come to it with a preconceived notion.

What did you think about Julie and Julia; I'm assuming you saw it.
I did see it. You know, Julia Child was enormously generous to me and to every young food writer she came across. She was an interesting person. I know I'm

the only person who feels that way, but I thought that she was an annoying twit in the movie. I just felt like she was a woman with real gravitas. She was an incredibly hard worker, and she seems sort of flighty and silly in the movie and not at all the way I remembered her. She is absolutely not the kind of cook that I am; I mean, her recipes drive me crazy. She really holds your hand and walks you through it bit by bit. But I *totally* respect the enormous work and discipline she put into those books. I felt as though you really didn't get a sense of that in the movie.

Can you talk about what you're working on?
I'm working on actually three separate projects. Up here, I'm working on a novel. And I'm working on a cookbook. I'm not working on it here, but I've been working on it all year. The *Gourmet* cookbooks weren't really mine; I just edited them. But I had a thought about how I wanted to approach a cookbook, which is very different, so I've been doing that. And I've been thinking about the next memoir, which will be the *Gourmet* years.

How might you take a different approach to your new cookbook?
I don't see recipes as operating instructions. I see them as something that you will make your own. I'm trying to write the recipes in a way that instead of grabbing your hand saying, 'You will march to my tune and you will do this in exactly this order,' I'm trying to make you want to cook something and then give you just enough directions that it will nudge you into being creative. You will have to ultimately think of the recipe as yours not mine.

Do you plan on having photography in it?
No

Let's talk more about your kitchen. I know you're without it and missing it, but back home, do you have a computer in your kitchen?
I take my computer in there.

Do you use a computer while cooking?
I don't most of the time. I tend to be more of an intuitive cook. Even when I'm making recipes I tend to reconstruct them later. I really love cooking; it's really a pleasure for me. It's very sensual; it's not really about looking at a screen.

Okay, so can I ask you a really specific question about one of your recipes? Your cobbler that's on your website? Can I make that without cornstarch?
Of course you can!

Is there a good substitute?
You can use some flour.

Ok.
It would really depend how juicy the peaches are anyway. If you end up with peaches that are like rocks, which is what many are like (*laughs*), you don't need it at all. You know, no matter what you do with that recipe, if you have a decent peach, it's going to be good.

I think for me and other timid cooks, you can buy these incredible ingredients and want to safeguard yourselves from making any errors, so you get held back.
I would say better off to not go for expensive ingredients and to allow yourself to make mistakes. Making mistakes is how you learn and how you learn what you like. It's not something that's going to make or break someone's day. If you don't make the best meal of your life, it's no tragedy.

You have quite a few speaking engagements coming up: how do you fare traveling and what are some of your habits while on the road? I remember you put on your Twitter recently how terrible the plane snacks are.
Oh, you know, I *know* I should be one of those people who packs food for the plane and I don't. I'm always curious what you'll find in airports. Some airports are really good. The really strange thing is a lot of my travel has been on book tour and on book tour, you basically don't eat. You're always speaking at lunch and dinner and you're doing interviews, and you get back to your room at 11 o'clock ravenous and you call up room service.

Oh man!
People always ask, 'Where are you eating in town?' and, 'Oh my gosh, if you even knew where I was eating.' (*laughs*)

I'd imagine you know just about every successful chef. Talk about the gender discrepancies in professional kitchens.
One of the first pieces I wrote, when I was just starting out as a writer, was a piece about women chefs. This was in the late '70s. We were all convinced that the time of the woman chef was coming. And these women had amazing stories: they had been so harassed in kitchens. As a journalist, wonderful story after another about the terrible things that mostly French chefs had done to them to keep them out of their kitchens. We were absolutely convinced that that was going to change. I think that the reason that didn't change is not something that I had ever anticipated, which is that, women realized when they got to be about 30 there is *no* way you're going to have a family and be a chef. It's such grueling, unforgiving work. That's why women started going into pastry. You work a reasonable day. And then you go home. I had never anticipated that it would be women themselves who decided they didn't want that. That's pretty much the case, I think. Very few women have managed to be professional chefs and have a family. Chefs need a wife; whether they're men or women, they need a wife.