



THE YEAR OF LIVING RICHLY.

Look back over pivotal events of your life, and I'll bet you dollars-to-dumplings you remember exactly where you were, who you were with, and what you were doing when you got "the news."

On this particular sultry September eve, I happened to be at a Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers concert with my husband, Shannon, and our good friends and kindred spirits in the outdoors, Pete and Beth, rapt as Tom, Mike Campbell, and the boys tore it up with their customary intensity. So when my phone vibrated the arrival of a text message from my jeans pocket, I nearly ignored it. But as with all parents—yes, even those of us with adult children—I pulled it out for a fleeting glance at the screen. Not son nor daughter, but my book agent: "We have an offer. It's a good one."

Thank heavens it's September, I remember thinking. You see, the first chapter of my proposed book, *The Field to Table Cookbook: Gardening, Foraging, Fishing & Hunting*, devotes itself to this month, with chapters for the subsequent months. Each chapter includes essays on hunting, fishing, foraging, and gardening, along with recipes for each in the height of its season. With only a skeletal outline and a handful of sample chapters, I would need to bear down on gathering my ingredients. If I missed an animal this season, I couldn't simply run out to the grocery store to pick up, say, a brace of pintails, a fat doe, or a couple dozen quail. And I just had one crack at it, as the book would be published in less than a year.

Plus, although many of the recipes had been developed over the course of many years, not only the finished recipes for wild game would need to be photographed, but so would the wild forageables—some, such as pawpaws, so ephemeral that the window of opportunity is mere days.

For the next few weeks my office resembled that of a modern-day war room. Excel spreadsheets—one for the opening and closing of Texas's season for each game animal; one for prime times to target freshwater and saltwater fish; one for the availability of wild foraged greens, roots, tubers, fruits, and nuts;

and one for planting and harvest times for an array of fruits and vegetables in USDA Hardiness Zone 8b—festooned the walls. Shannon (he's the outdoor writer for the *Houston Chronicle*) could only shake his head, bemused. "I knew if I remarried, my second wife would complain about hunting," he said. "What I didn't know is that she'd complained about not going often enough."

In short order, the news that I was writing a wild game and fish cookbook spread like a brushfire through our extended circle of hunting and fishing buddies. My sporting calendar filled up quicker than a debutante's *programme du bal*. And the magic that would ensue—although related to my culinary pursuits—both humbled and inspired me.

More than anything else, my hunting and fishing became imbued with an intensity that surprised me, as I had not yet experienced that. A different, deeper intensity than pursuing a trophy buck, behemoth bass, or leviathan speckled trout—or even a Volkswagen-sized gobbler (well, except for Emilio, Lord of the Llano,



For Susan Ebert, the thought of writing a cookbook had never entered her mind until being coaxed into doing so. "Once I began, a world of riches—ones far greater than the treasures placed on the dining table—opened to me," she says.

that is, who eluded me on multiple occasions and for whom my fever remains). Each quail, each snipe, each pheasant, duck, or goose achieved trophy status, a prized ingredient I had procured myself. (And although I *did* bag a very nice turkey, Emilio still stalks the limestone ledges of the Llano, and I vow next spring he will be mine.)

At times the veil between our world and the spirit world slips just enough that we catch glimpses beyond. Later that month was one of those times. As fortune would have it, Shannon and I had been invited in August to join two other outdoor writer friends on a Hill Country deer lease. The circumstances left us far from elated, though: Turns out that before Bob Hood, our dear friend and revered, long-tenured outdoor writer at the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, succumbed to cancer earlier that year, he requested that we be the first to be invited to take his place on that lease (and yes; it really is that hard to get a good Hill Country deer lease). John, Bob's dear friend and our now-leasemate, was convinced that after Bob's passing his spirit had inhabited a ring-tailed cat that we'd occasionally see around the rickety 1880s-era ranch house.

"He has Bob's eyes," John would insist, pointing out that the ringtail only left prints on the hood of his truck and no one else's. Shannon and I conjectured that perhaps John had lingered a bit too long on the whiskey porch.

But as Shannon and I dove hunted at the lease on a mid-afternoon soon after, a ring-tailed cat—and you know as well as I do how rare it is to see this nocturnal creature in broad daylight—nonchalantly strolled toward me and paused about ten paces away, calm and relaxed as can be.

"Well, hi, Bob," I said, before even realizing I had spoken. We commenced to talk for a good while.

When the birds stopped flying, Shannon, who was about a hundred yards down the fencerow to my left, ambled over.

"Who were you talking to?" he asked, to which I responded, "Bob. He wanted to hear all about the cookbook."

"Oh," he replied, unruffled. "That's who I thought you were talking to."

Turns out the ringtail had come to Shannon the night before, backlit by moonlight and peering at him through the window with apparent approval as

Shannon relaxed in Bob's favorite chair.

As Shannon and I usually hunt alone, the joys of the social aspects of hunting came as a pleasant surprise. Thunderbird Hunting Club leases between 15,000 and 20,000 acres of the Texas mid-coast, primarily for waterfowl hunting, but also for hog hunting, snipe hunting, crabbing, and spectacular bay fishing for redfish, speckled trout, flounder, sheepshead, and black drum.

Co-owners Todd Steele and Paul McDonald, as well as club members—many of whom have become lifelong friends—extended offers to come hunt, fish, or crab with them. To show my appreciation, I prepared lavish wild game and fish feasts at the club, so the membership became an unofficial recipe-testing board, to boot. The bonds of fellowship forged in shared blinds and over shared meals strengthened at each outing.

My bond with my husband deepened and strengthened, as well. Witnessing together, close-up, two whooping cranes calling to each other as they slipped in and out of an ethereal ground fog found us holding hands like a couple of teenagers, awestruck by these two majestic lifelong mates dancing their sky ballet. Fishing our way down spring-fed riffles of the South Llano whilst turkeys, doves, deer, and armadillos nonchalantly went about their daily business . . . watching a young coyote chase a butterfly . . . fashioning a duck blind from palmetto stalks along Baffin Bay's sandy shores, then watching the seamless expanse of sea and sky split open with the rising sun as tens of thousands of redheads rose against a melted rainbow-sherbet sky . . . these shared experiences afield brought a deeper dimension to an already rich devotion to each other. We vowed to each other to go afield—together—as often as we can, for as long as we can.

The natural world pulses with magic every moment of every day. To witness it, you must be there. The more you immerse yourself in the natural world and open yourself to it, the more of it you will experience. And when you eat delicious meals imbued with those experiences—especially when shared with family and friends—this is living richly, indeed. ■