



THE SEASON OF GOOD THINGS

AS FAMILY AND FRIENDS GATHER TO ENJOY THE HOLIDAYS, ENTERTAINING TAKES CENTER STAGE. **SUSAN L. EBERT** SHARES HOW TO CELEBRATE THE SOUTHWEST AFIELD — WITH REGIONALLY INSPIRED RECIPES, FESTIVE TABLETOPS & CLASSIC TRADITIONS

WYATT MCSPADEN

DESPITE MILD TEMPERATURES — IT'S TEXAS, AFTER ALL — impending winter announces itself in a multitudinous tumble. Hurricane season succumbs to the north wind, on which skeins of migrating ducks and geese surf southward. The harvested remains of summer's emerald fields of corn and milo now serve

as amber-hued quail coverts. In the meadows and on the prairies, crimson cactus pears — “tunas,” as we call them — festoon the rims of nopales like showy garnet-hued Christmas lights. Neon-magenta American beautyberries and fiery scarlet chile pequins dot bushes rimming the woodlands, while deep within, oaks, pecans, hickories and walnuts rain down fat-rich nuts. Orion, the mighty hunter, awakes from his slumber to rise in the eastern evening sky.

The shoulders from a fat feral sow shot earlier this year now fill a square dozen tamales in my deep freeze. Several flounder from a recent night-gigging expedition, scaled, gilled, gutted, and vacuum-sealed, lay in the freezer as well. The bushel basketfuls of prickly pears my husband and I harvested from our Hill Country deer lease have been processed into stained-glass clear juice, jelly and syrup. Alongside them in the pantry, a dozen or so jars of beautyberry jelly and canned homemade red chile sauce await their appointed openings. Now, as Orion beckons, my thoughts turn to hunting.

With gatherings of family and friends being another hallmark of the season, I like to combine my girlfriend get-togethers with a little old-fashioned grocery shopping before we share a repast of our wild harvest. Fortunately, a number of my friends enjoy quail hunting as much as do I, which gives us a great excuse to catch up on each others' lives. Whether stalking bobwhites through prairie corn stubble with Rebecca and Kim, strolling the majestic pecan bottomlands along the Red River with Charlotte or traversing the vast Trans-Pecos in west Texas with Karen, these shared stolen days afield take on a spiritual, near-sacred significance. As we're sisters, girlfriends, wives and mothers juggling busy personal lives and

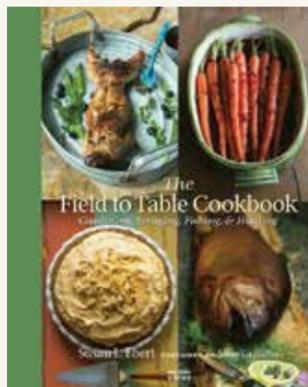
demanding full-time jobs, becoming totally immersed in the natural world together allows us a cherished breather before the onslaught of the holidays.

As the dogs bound ahead, we walk and talk, sometimes with arms around each other's waists, shotguns a-shoulder, with the knowledge that soon our own days will shorten as does this gold-glazed autumn-to-winter day afield — much too short, but burning forever in the crucible of our hearts.

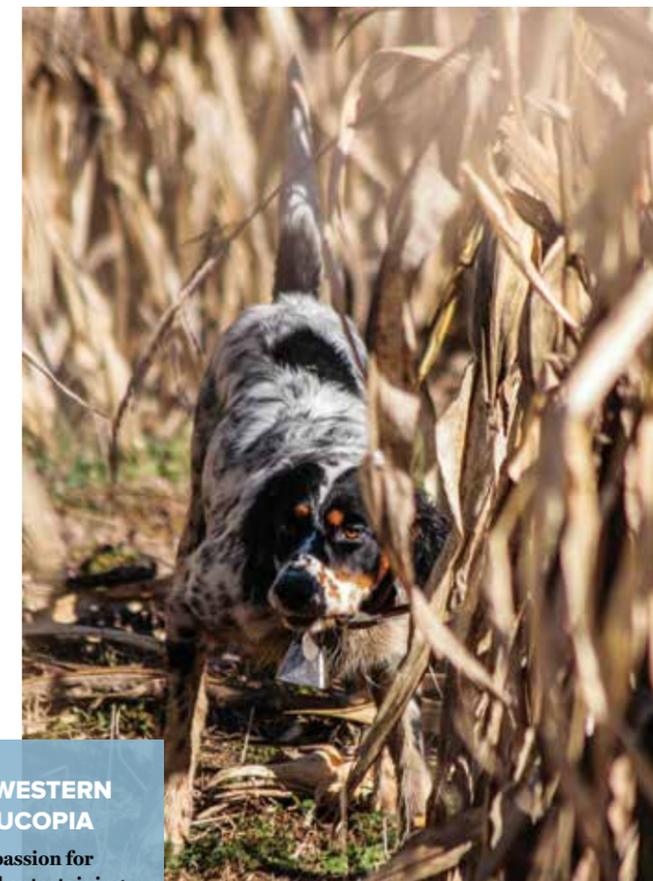
My love of the culinary arts has shown me that that same exacting preparation when given to wild, organic ingredients can result in a lavish yet effortless supper afield. Better yet, it allows the cook plenty of time to enjoy some camaraderie over cocktails and treasured memories of fine friends, beautiful dogs, wild birds, and those special slivers of time in the places where they converge.

Being a single parent throughout my children's frenetic, sports-fueled high school years in a home we shared with an ever-shedding Sheltie and two Siamese cats taught me that if I waited to entertain until my house was immaculately clean, I would never have anyone over at all. Blessed with Austin's temperate climes and a backyard pool shaded by huge live oaks and encircled by a spacious yard, I developed a knack for outdoor entertaining. Conjuring up the warmth and hospitality of my Mamaw Grace's farmhouse kitchen and endless summers studded with backyard barbecues and fish fries, I mastered the backyard, then leapt farther afield to state parks, vacation cabins, duck camps, forests and meadows.

From Miss Grace, I learned to focus on two things: the food and the guests. When each guest feels treasured and the food's phenomenal,

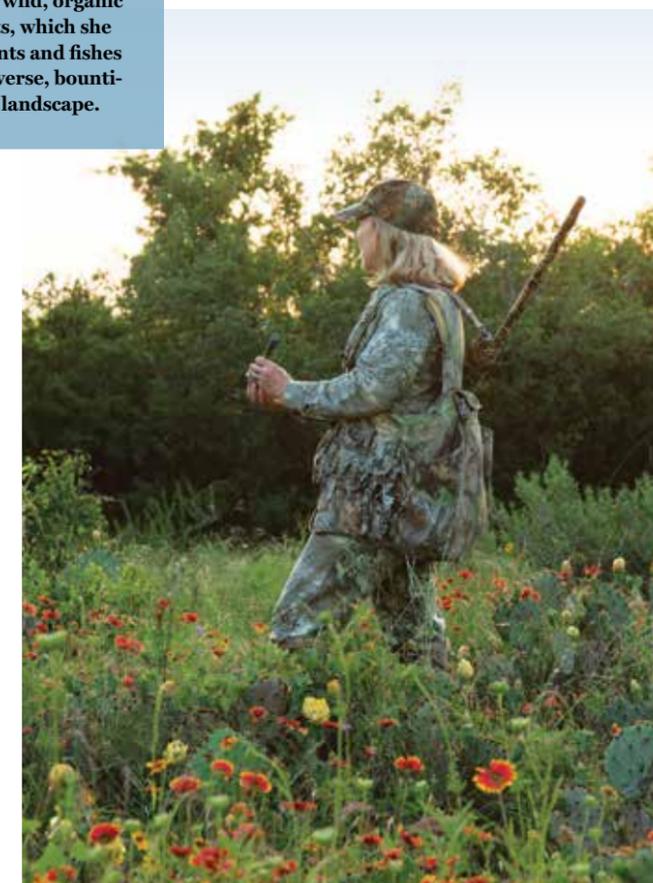


Susan L. Ebert's *The Field to Table Cookbook: Gardening, Foraging, Fishing & Hunting*



SOUTHWESTERN CORNUCOPIA

Ebert's passion for cooking and entertaining begins with wild, organic ingredients, which she gathers, hunts and fishes from the diverse, bountiful Texas landscape.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WYATT MCSPADDEN, SUSAN L. EBERT, SHANNON TOMPKINS (2)



**SEASONAL EARTH,
SKY AND SEA SUPPER**

**Thunderbird Prickly
Pear Margaritas**

**American Beautyberry Jelly
with Homemade Baguettes**

Beet and Blood Orange Salad

**Holly Jolly Tamales
with Guajillo-Árbol Sauce**

**Chicken-fried Quail with
Cilantro Dipping Sauce**

Crab-stuffed Flounder

Prickly Pear Ice Cream

Recipes at doradomagazine.com



everything else will work out — even when someone inevitably steps on the cat's tail.

One simple step will elevate your outdoor party from ordinary to elegant: Ditch the paper and plastic. Not only do frugal finds such as the ones shown here allow you to repurpose discards while not risking damage or loss to your at-home tabletop goods, they're far more environmentally friendly, to boot.

First, "shop" your home — not just the kitchen and dining room but throughout the house — for items that can withstand the outdoors with aplomb. Those lovely valances at the back of the closet, sun-aged and paint-stained but "too good" to throw away? Stitched together and tea-stained overnight, they're reborn as a rustic table runner. The metal canister used for fireplace ashes becomes an outdoor vase, wreathed with shed antlers from a spring turkey hunt. Leave the good barware in the cabinets, and use jelly jars with festive paper straws instead.

Once you've taken inventory at home, head out a-thriftin' and a-fleain'! Mismatched, so-called "orphan" plates and silverware have a shabby-chic appeal. I also hunt for vintage aluminum-ware serving pieces; they can handle the fridge or freezer, can be warmed to 350° F, are virtually unbreakable and often cost \$5 or less. Hitting the flea markets and thrift shops makes for a great rainy day activity, and it's made all the better when your newfound treasures are both eye-catching and economical. Don't fret yet about going for "a look." As you collect, your own personal style will evolve organically into a look your guests will recognize as uniquely yours.

Choose a menu, such as the one on page 58, without a good deal of last-minute prep so that you

can lavish attention on your guests. Most of the time-consuming prep can be done weeks ahead, such as making the jelly, the tamales, and the chile sauce. Even the ice cream can be made several days in advance. The day before, mix the bread dough and let it rise in the bowl while you roast the beets, wash and dry the greens, and make the salad dressing and remoulade. In the morning, remove the dough from the refrigerator, shape it into loaves, let it rise again and bake the bread. Stuff the flounder, marinate the quail and mix the margaritas — then, stash 'em all in the fridge.

Finishing up supper will take less than 30 minutes. Steam the tamales and bake the flounder for 15 minutes or so while you fry the quail. When the flounder comes out of the oven, crank it up to 425° F to warm the bread for about five minutes. Let's pour the margaritas!

Now that you've set the stage and prepared the food, remember to enjoy your own party. My late mother Ruby Jewel was renowned for being a great conversationalist. When I watched her to see how she did it, I discovered her secret: Miss Ruby was a great listener, and completely focused her attention and 1,000-watt smile on each guest in turn. Do this, and not only will your guests have a great time, you will, too. ✨

PREPARE YOUR OWN FEAST AFIELD

Visit doradomagazine.com/entertaining for Susan L. Ebert's recipes and more.

4 IDEAS FOR BUILDING A TABLESCAPE

1. REFINISHING TOUCHES

My best junk store find of all is a distressed wooden farm table with screw-on legs that I sanded and refinished. Legs off, the upturned top slides into the bed of our pickup where coolers of food and crates of linens, plates, and silverware can be transported on top of it, and the table sets up easily afield.

2. TAKE A BOUGH

In lieu of a trip to the florist, consider fashioning a centerpiece from native plants such as pine boughs, pinecones, grapevines, and fall fruits and berries.

3. AMP THE LAMPLIGHT

I like to fill a metal tray with assorted sizes of Mason jars and jelly jars, with a bright-colored votive candle in each. When an electrical outlet's handy, count on me to pull out a few strings of Christmas mini-lights — I hot-glued spent shotgun shells over the bulbs on one of the strands.

4. DYE HARD

For tired table linens that need more "oomph" than tea-staining, I like to use the fiber-reactive tub dyes from Dharma Trading Company, which result in brilliant Southwestern colors that won't run or fade.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SUSAN L. EBERT (3), SHANNON TOMPKINS