

## Eat my words... the world's best food blogs

What makes a top food blogger? An appetite for life and no qualms about crossing an ocean in search of the perfect meal says **Rafael Behr**

### 1. **Chocolate and Zucchini**

<http://www.chocolateandzucchini.com/>

#### **Zucchini - so this is an American blog?**

No, French actually. It's the blog of a young woman from Paris called Clothilde.

#### **Pourquoi donc l'Americanisme?**

Clothilde lived for a while in San Francisco.

#### **I get it. Freedom fries all round.**

Not quite, she blogs about good healthy food - the zucchini bit; and bad sweet food - the chocolate bit.

#### **Savoury-sweet, Gallo-West Coast choc-veg fusion?**

If you like. Or just elegant writing about nice food. Clothilde is the closest food blogging gets to aristocracy.

### 2. **Noodlepie**

<http://noodlepie.typepad.com>

#### **Sounds like something you get at a petrol station, like Pukka pies and scotch eggs.**

Actually it's a food blog about Vietnam.

#### **Or a cheesy pet name for your boyfriend.**

I said it's about Vietnam - the people, the sounds, the smells, the tastes.

#### **Hence noodles.**

Yes. And other things. Pieman, the author, is a witty travel writer and accomplished photographer.

#### **What if I don't like noodles?**

Saigon has a wide variety of delectable treats to tempt your palate.

#### **What if I don't like Saigon?**

Now you're just being silly.

### 3. **101 Cookbooks**

[www.101cookbooks.com](http://www.101cookbooks.com)

#### **Let me guess, mad vampish woman kidnaps 101 cute cookbooks to turn their jackets into fashionable coats.**

That's right. And then Nigella Lawson and Jamie Oliver go on an adventure to rescue them.

#### **Really!?**

No, of course not. It's a blog by a woman in San Francisco who had so many cookbooks she decided to go through them all one recipe at a time. And blog about it.

#### **How far has she got?**

She started in February 2003, so the 101st recipe was a while back.

#### **And her favourite cook book so far?**

There's a top 10 on the site. Stephan Pyles's Southwest Vegetarian comes in at No 1. Nigel Slater's Appetite is No 2.

### 4. **Is my blog burning?**

[www.ismyblogburning.com](http://www.ismyblogburning.com)

#### **I don't know, what does burning blog smell like?**

Don't be silly, it's the name for a site that brings bloggers together for a sort of online cooking jamboree.

#### **How does it work?**

Food bloggers take it in turns to host sessions around a particular theme or ingredient - fish, rice, eggs, for example. Other bloggers pitch in with their recipes and photos.

#### **So it's a competition.**

Kind of. In a cosy, peer-to-peer internet community sort of way.

#### **Sounds a bit like hippy talk to me**

Have another slice of lentil flan.

### 5. **Accidentalhedonist**

[www.accidentalhedonist.com](http://www.accidentalhedonist.com)

#### **Nice name. Nice art deco design on the site too. I'm thinking Great Gatsby meets Anne Tyler.**

Hmm. Think more along the lines of Nigella meets Michael Moore.

#### **Urgh. I've got a fat man in a baseball cap winking seductively at me in my head.**

That's all wrong. You should have a sassy woman who knows her food but also has acerbic comments to make about corporate America and the food industry.

#### **Sounds nice.**

Sharp and sweet at the same time. Like a good lemon tart, washed down with plenty of dessert wine.

#### **Not fat and decadent like a Big Mac dissolved in weak lager?**

Definitely not.

### ...and finally Chez Pim

<http://chezpim.typepad.com>

#### **OK, I'm getting the hang of this now. Let me guess. Pim writes about all manner of culinary goodies, flying between San Francisco, Paris and London in search of the perfect profiterole.**

That's about right.

#### **Are you serious?**

Yes, you were right the first time.

#### **Wow. So what does Pim cook?**

Great Thai food but this is not the place for recipes. The international jet set doesn't have time to cook. This is all about checking out glam restaurants and idling in cafes.

#### **Nice work if you can get it.**

Sorry, did you say something? I was distracted by a window full of patisseries on the Rue Bonaparte. Oh! Must dash. Gotta plane to catch, ciao!

leaving behind lush, drooling comments. 'Hi Pim. Your pictures made me empty,' writes one. Or, 'Is it me or was that meal, like, 65 per cent dessert?' To them she is, rightly, considered the queen of the food bloggers. At times, reading her website, it feels like this really is Pim's world. The rest of us are just living in it.

But Pim's world is not simply about the flummery and gloss of Michelin stars. Like all people of true appetite (a polite phrase for 'greedy') she is obsessed by food in all its forms: she visits diners and grill houses, eats street food and takeaways, shops in exotic corner stores and farmers' markets. In her time she has written about all of these things. Partly this is because she has made her home in San Francisco, a city which is particularly well endowed with ad hoc eating opportunities. One morning, just after she has returned from one of her mouth-tours of Europe, she agrees to meet up with me for a Pim-style tour of her town. 'San Francisco is big on Chinese food and Hispanic food,' she says, keenly. 'Though the best place for tacos is actually an hour outside the city, in Watsonville. In Watsonville they do great brain, tripe or tongue tacos. I really like those.'

Instead of brain tacos we will start our day with breakfast at Tartine, one of those faux French joints the Americans do really well. Here they even serve café au lait in big handleless bowls, which they don't do much in Paris any more. It's a converted

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industrial-looking space, with white-painted brick walls and big glass cabinets heaving with delicious looking pastries. 'The most fun time to come here is a Sunday morning when a significant proportion of the clientele are naughty girls who didn't make it home last night,' says Pim. 'It's the walk of shame breakfast.'

Over coffee and croissants Pim describes the journey that has taken her from her native Bangkok to queen of the bloggers. She grew up, she says, in a large upper-middle-class Thai family, all living together in various houses on their own compound. She was closest to her grandfather, Surin, who had his own cook. 'I'd never see my grandfather in the kitchen,' she says. 'I'm not even sure he knew where it was.' But he did have strong ideas about the correct way to do things where Thai food was concerned. 'When we used to go to restaurants we could only order three things in each place because they were the only things they could do well according to grandfather, and of course he was right.'

In the early Nineties Pim moved to the US to study cognitive science, which led eventually to a series of high-flying jobs in the technology sector, ending up at the gargantuan Cisco Systems. Working in the tech business during the great internet boom had many advantages, not least of

which was money. Pim soon had enough to indulge her growing interest in food and restaurants. 'It's my vice,' she says.

In 2001 she started her blog. 'But it wasn't about food then. I used to write these long emails to all my friends around the world and they would be addressed to 30 people, so I thought why not put them on a website?' Mostly she wrote about books she'd read and films she'd seen and what was going on in her life. But because she eats out and travels a lot, people started asking for recommendations. 'In 2003 I started writing about food and recipes.' The traffic to her site exploded. 'I went through this period of, "Oh my God, who are all these people?"' For a while she edited out all the personal stuff. 'Now I've settled into a comfortable mix of the two.'

It's this wry, sassy personal take that makes for such engrossing reading. One recent post, for example, was about a trip to London with her boyfriend David Kinch a top chef at Manresa, San Francisco, one of the top 50 restaurants in the world. (They got together after she wrote approving reviews of his restaurant on her blog.) She gave us a perfect ringside account of the meeting of the world's greatest chefs including a conversation she had with guest of honour Paul Bocuse: 'The conversation was rather short, what with all the noise in the room and the fact that he was 75 hundred years old and quite hard of hearing.'

It's time for us to move on. We jump in a cab to the Richmond district on the west side of the city, where there is a Chinatown the tourists never visit. She leads me into the massive May Wah supermarket at 707 Clement Street, which is where she comes when buying ingredients for her Thai dishes. She is regarded by her many friends as one of the best Thai chefs outside Thailand, and has been known to fly to London just to cook dinner for them.

Along one wall of the May Wah are bubbling tanks of live fish and shellfish including alarmingly penile clams, called geoduck, which are so big they have cracked their own shells. On the butchery slabs there are trays of chicken hearts and chunks of wobbling, coagulated blood which Pim says 'is clearly fresh because it is almost a fluorescent red.'

Down the street we come to the Clement BBQ, a café specialising in Chinese meats. There are mahogany-coloured ducks hanging in the windows and a whole side of crispy pig. We can't resist, and order a portion which the guy behind the counter cleavers off and chops up for us. This pork has the richest, sweetest crackling I have ever tasted.

Our cab takes us back across town to a San Francisco institution, the Swan Oyster Depot on Polk Street. It's small and narrow, with a long marble-topped bar and queues stretching out the door from 11am onwards. 'This is just one of those places you have to do,' says Pim, as we slip onto a couple of vacant stools. It originally opened in 1912, and has been in the Sancimino family since 1946. The Sancimino boys who run it now are big guys with white aprons and thick forearms, from shucking



Pim overlooking the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco.

so many oysters. We share a mixed plate of Blue Points, Kumamotos, some Miyagi from Oregon and some Olympias.

It sets us up perfectly for a tram ride up and down the San Francisco switchbacks to the old Ferry Building down by the water. This is gastro-porn heaven, home to some of the best producers in the city. We go to the Cowgirl Creamery and, under Pim's watchful gaze, sample slivers of cheeses with names like Humboldt Fog and Pleasant Ridge Reserve. 'The American cheese laws are ridiculous,' she says. Nothing unpasteurised is allowed unless it is over 90 days old. We have a look at the Hog Island Oyster Company which, Pim says, serves 'a very good clam chowder'. Then we move on up to Grant Avenue, the heart of the city's famous other Chinatown. She leads me into Chinese sweet shops where, alongside usual offerings of chocolates and toffees, there are buckets of candied dried shrimps and sugared squid. She takes me across to one of the dried food stores where, in racks of jars behind the counter, are birds' nests waiting for their moment in soup. I had never realised just how expensive they are. There are birds' nests here selling at \$3,840 a pound.

Just beyond the On Sang Poultry Company, where the assistants are noncha-

lantly putting live chickens into paper bags before stapling them shut and punching air holes, is the Golden Gate Bakery. This is another San Francisco institution, though it isn't much to look at: a tiny shop front with barely space for the queue that quickly builds up. 'Oh, but the custard tarts are something special,' Pim says. We eventually get our custard tarts, still warm from the oven. They cost 60 cents each, less if you get them by the dozen. Standing there in the street, with crumbs of pastry down my front and listening to the sound of clucking chickens heading towards somebody's dinner table, we agree that our tour is over. I have to go for a lie down and Pim has a blog to attend to. Earlier this year, after a long stretch earning the silicon dollar, Pim decided she'd made enough to take a bit of time out to concentrate on her food writing. She is considering writing a recipe book. She has been sounding out agents. Television producers have been sniffing around her. None of this is surprising. Even amid the anarchy of the web good taste will out and Pim, queen of the food bloggers, mistress of the Michelin stars, is sodden with it. For the moment she is that rare thing in the food world, a genuine cult figure. She is unlikely to stay that way for long.

## Pim's secret address book for San Francisco

### **Tasting menu at Manresa**

A leisurely-paced parade of small bites. *320 Village Lane, Los Gatos (001 408 354 4330)*

### **Omakase at Kiss Seafood**

An immaculate and deceptively simple meal of pristine fish and seafood. *1700 Laguna Street, San Francisco (001 415 474 2866)*

### **Wine pairing at the French Laundry**

The choices are always interesting. *6640 Washington Street, Yountville (001 707 944 2380)*

### **Drinking at Soif**

Great wines from the famous Berkeley wine merchant Kermit Lynch. *105 Walnut Avenue, Santa Cruz (001 831 423 2020)*

### **Burger at Zuni Café**

It's delicious. And it haunts my dreams. *1658 Market Street, San Francisco (001 415 552 2522)*

### **Asparagus tempura at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market**

Fat, fresh lightly-battered spears. *1 Ferry Building, San Francisco (001 415 291 3276)*

### **Roasted goose at Yee's**

Roasted goose has a much better texture than duck. Another well-kept secret is the \$2 plate special every week day at 3pm. *1131 Grant Avenue, San Francisco (001 415 576 1818)*

### **Bakra (goat curry) at Shalimar**

Who said there's no good Pakistani curry house in San Francisco? Order the daily special bakra. *532 Jones Street, San Francisco (001 415 928 0333)*

### **Mexican food at Pajaro Food Center**

Families bring their own pots to buy menudo - tripe and pig's foot stew - and other specialities in bulk on weekends. *307 Salinas Road, Watsonville (001 831 724 3654)*