

simply jennifer

behind the scenes with Jennifer Chandler
for the birth of her second cookbook, *Simply Suppers*

BY ALLISON LEMM

PHOTOS BY MELISSA PETERSEN

Birthing a cookbook isn't too different from birthing a baby. In fact, nine months is about the amount of time it took Jennifer Chandler to create her second cookbook, *Simply Suppers*, from inking the deal with the publisher to holding a precious copy in her hands. Those nine months of sweat and toil were worth every second once the finished cookbook arrived — but just like having a baby, the really hard work was just beginning.

Jennifer, with her delightful — and enviable — *que será será* disposition, makes the whole process of cookbook writing seem effortless. It's not.

"As soon as *Simply Salads* came out in April 2007 I knew I wanted to write another cookbook," says Jennifer. "Thomas Nelson approached me about possibly doing a series in April 2009 and we kind of went back and forth for several months to see if it would work, and they finally offered me a book deal in October 2009. It took a lot of patience — which I've learned is the key to being successful and maintaining your sanity in this business."

If waiting two years for a book deal tried Jennifer's patience, it was nothing compared to having to create, write and photograph 100-plus recipes in four months. Because comfort food was the focus of the cookbook, the publisher wanted to release it in early fall, which meant Jennifer had to turn in her finished manuscript by March — and somehow find the time for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and keep up with her two young girls, Hannah and Sarah, and their myriad of activities, lessons, games and homework. Whew!

Every time I spoke with Jen during the four-month marathon I became overwhelmed just hearing about a typical day — get the girls off to school, parent meeting, workout, five trips to various groceries and

markets, cook several dishes, write article for *Edible Memphis*, several phone calls with publisher, two radio interviews, run about town borrowing dishes, drive carpool, dentist, piano lesson, soccer game, dinner and homework for the girls, blog, Farmer's Market dinner.

"*C'est la vie*," she laughs. "I survived! There's nothing like pressure to make you work. As my friends and family can attest, I pretty much just worked solid for four months. 'See you in March' became my mantra."

THE WORK BEHIND EACH PAGE... CREATING, TESTING AND WRITING

Jennifer tackled writing *Simply Suppers* the same way she tackles everything else in her busy life...simply, gracefully, always smiling and.... with a posse of good friends by her side.

Jennifer started working on *Simply Suppers* in earnest by early November, writing down recipe lists and brainstorming about how to come up with the right balance of 100-plus really delicious, yet simple recipes that could be divided equally among the different chapters. Ideas came from restaurants, cookbooks, magazines, family and friends. Jennifer's chicken soup recipe, for instance, came from her dad, Tom Hanemann.

I wrote the basic ingredients for Pa's Chicken Soup on a scrap of paper," laughs Jennifer. "I made notes on the initial recipe, then added changes to make my own. I keep a notebook that shows the evolution of each recipe... from where I got the idea and that first scrap of paper listing the ingredients, through numerous edited ver-

Opposite: Jennifer with the 4-inch "bible" for *Simply Suppers*.





Jennifer checks the shots on the White Bean Chicken Chili.

sions and finally, the finished recipe. It also include detailed notes on the various stages of photography and approvals. It's my bible.”

Jennifer prepared each recipe two or three times, so with 122 recipes under consideration, she was cooking three or more recipes every day for two months. And hitting the grocery daily — sometimes as many as five times in one day. The people who work at her neighborhood grocery call her the crazy cookbook lady. I'm sure they love her there — with an estimated total of 200 trips to the grocery spending anywhere from \$25 to \$100 per visit. Her bill for butter and meat alone must be staggering. Jennifer used 50 pounds of butter and 100 pounds of meat while creating the recipes for *Simply Suppers*.

“I was always at the grocery and always cooking — and everything I cooked was for testing recipes,” she explains. “I also had 20 recipe testers — and at least five testers made each recipe. I increased the number of recipe testers with this cookbook due to the collapsed time frame.”

Jennifer selected recipe testers from various parts of the country who represented all cooking levels — from kitchen novices to trained chefs — and had the group make the recipes and report back with comments and suggested changes.

“A lot of the changes came from my wonderful recipe testers who came back with things that I took for granted — things I thought everyone would know — so I would clarify, or add a tip, or a substitution,” Jennifer explains. “My White Bean Chicken Chile is a recipe that I've made for at least 10 years that calls for poblano peppers. I am able to get these year-round here in Memphis, so I figured you could get them anywhere. But you know what? I had recipe testers in Atlanta, Buckhead of all places, who couldn't find poblano peppers, so I added a substitution. The feedback from my recipe testers was invaluable.”

In all, 12 recipes didn't make it into *Simply Suppers* for one reason or another. Either Jennifer didn't like the way something turned out, or she thought it was too difficult, or it was too much like something else in the cookbook. As she finalized the recipe list, which included 110 recipes, she tried not to get too attached to any preconceived ideas about which recipes would make the cut.

“On my initial list of things I thought should go in a comfort food cookbook, fried chicken was at the top of the list,” she says. “But, sadly, I'd never made fried chicken before. No one in my family ever had either, so I started playing around with different recipes people had given me. I looked at different cookbooks and must have made fried chicken half a dozen times. After all that, I never made one recipe that I liked. I tried marinating the chicken in buttermilk, not marinating it in buttermilk. I tried double crusting it, not double crusting it. Cooking it in a fryer. Cooking it in a cast iron skillet. I was never happy with it and thought, why am I doing this when I have a fabulous recipe for Potato Chip Encrusted Chicken Fingers?”



Natalie Root photographs the Garlic and Rosemary Lamb Chops.

MAKING IT ALL LOOK PRETTY

Ideally, cookbooks are written first, and then photographed. But Jennifer's photographer, Natalie Root, lives in New Orleans, so they decided to photograph the book in parts, as it was written, with photo sessions taking place before Christmas, in January, and again in February, for a total of 15 days. More than 1,000 shots were taken and 104 were selected for the cookbook.

“The photography was definitely stressful with the short time frame and the holidays,” admits Jennifer, “but Natalie and I got in the groove of photographing as we went along. We would shoot about eight recipes a day — all on the corner of my dining room table because that's the spot in my house with the best light. It was hard to

shoot more than two or three days in a row, because after Natalie left, I still had to clean up, shop, cook and set the place settings for the next day, which means I was working 15–16 hour days.”

Jennifer served as her own food stylist for *Simply Suppers*. And she is proud of the fact that all the food in the photos is edible, not shel-lacked or varnished, even down to the ice cream — which she has learned must be scooped and frozen overnight to make it last longer the day of the shoot.

“When photographing food, it needs to be shot in 30 minutes or it looks dead,” she explains. “And if the lighting is not right...well, let’s just say there have been dishes I’ve had to make twice because I wasn’t happy with the photos. It’s funny, too, that some recipes you think are going to be easy to shoot are difficult, and others you think will be difficult are a piece of cake.”

But things do happen. During one photo shoot, Jennifer placed a pie back in the fridge to stay firm and something got placed on top of it, so half of it was smushed. Rather than make another pie, Jennifer ended up photographing just a part of the pie and it turned out beautifully.

“You just have to go with the flow,” she says.

Food styling is making the food look pretty for the camera, which includes selecting the right dishes and linens to make the food look fabulous. Jennifer vowed that no dish would be used twice in the book, so she borrowed dishes from lots of friends, her mom, Barbara Hanemann, as well as Babcock Gifts and Lodge Cast Iron, who were nice enough to loan her pieces. Not surprisingly, Jen kept all the borrowed items catalogued and returned them promptly with a hug and a smile.



Friends and family who had a hand in *Simply Suppers*. Photo by Mark Ramirez



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Jennifer demonstrates recipes from *Simply Salads* at Whole Foods Market.

PROMOTING THE BOOK...AND JENNIFER

Once a cookbook is photographed and sent to the publisher for the initial layout, it's done — or so you'd think. In actuality, Jennifer's hardest job begins after the cookbook's publication. After all, what's the point in writing a cookbook if no one buys it?

“About the time my first cookbook was about to come out, I did a story on Ted and Matt Lee who had just won the James Beard Cookbook of the Year Award for *The Lee Bros. Southern Cookbook*. I asked them for advice for a first time author — remember, these are people who were getting a lot of publicity and who had just won this major award — and the number one thing they said to me was, ‘if you want your book to be known in the South, you’ve got to be the one to do it.’ I thought, but you guys are much bigger game than I am! And they said, ‘no, no, no, every publisher is the same. If you want to be out there you have to be willing to do the leg work.’”

Jennifer took the Lee brothers advice to heart, and it paid off.

“I think one of the things that really helped me secure both book deals was that publishers saw that I was ambitious. I did most of the PR work by myself for *Simply Salads* — arranging book tours, creating an online presence and calling media outlets to get them to write and talk about my book. They saw that I was working hard to promote myself through all the traditional media outlets — and that I’d also tackled the whole internet side with Facebook and Twitter. Publishers are looking for people who aren’t just talented in writing, but who are willing to go the extra mile to engage their audience. It’s important to me to build relationships with the people who are buying my cookbooks. A side benefit is that I’ve made some great friends in the process.”

Jennifer has a great partnership with her publisher and editors, and also has a publicist this time around. But taking *Simply Suppers* to the next level means Jennifer must be actively involved.

“It’s a very hands-on effort and I’m fortunate to have such a terrific team, but I want to make sure that I am doing all I possibly can to promote myself,” says Jennifer. “For instance, my publisher may not know all the small bookstores and gift shops in a certain city, so I’ll just call my friend who lives there and say, ‘I’m coming to your city, where should my book be?’ Then I have the salesperson from the publisher contact the store and get my book in their hands with pricing information, then once that is settled, I have my books sent to the media outlets in that city so we can set up interviews.”

With *Simply Suppers* hitting the shelves as you read this, Jennifer is busy making appearances, blogging, being interviewed, setting up book signings, scheduling media tours, serving as a spokesperson for French’s Mustard and, not surprisingly, working out the details for her next baby (cookbook), yet to be announced.

Of course, what Jennifer loves most about all this craziness she calls writing cookbooks, really, is the cooking.

“I just really love to cook,” she says, smiling. “To me, it’s a release, it’s therapeutic. I love to eat good food, and I’m very blessed to be able to do what I love for a living. I like creating something that actually makes people happy.”

That she does. *eM*

**Simply Suppers is available at Babcock Gifts,
Davis Kidd Booksellers, and online at www.amazon.com.**

Allison Lemm is a contributing editor of *Edible Memphis*. Her favorite recipes in *Simply Suppers* are the crawfish etouffée and the lemon pound cake.



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