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50

of the World's Most  
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& their Worthy Understudies

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# Q&A with Deb Perelman

When she launched the Smitten Kitchen in 2006, Deb Perelman had no idea that the food blog she produced from her cozy NYC kitchen would eventually draw eight million visitors a month, become her full-time day job and cook up a killer book deal. With her first cookbook set for an October release, and just as she gears up for a nationwide book tour, Perelman took time to chat about making friends with neighborhood baristas, food dye disasters and her favorite flavors of the season.

**Imbibe:** How did you first get started with Smitten Kitchen?

**Deb Perelman:** I just really like to cook. I'd previously had a blog where I'd write about life, New York and all that stuff, but it was slowly becoming more food-focused, so it became pretty obvious that I needed to just start a new food-specific site.

**When do you sit down to write? Do you have any morning, afternoon or evening drinking rituals that inspire your work?**  
I definitely function best when I write in the morning and cook in the afternoon—that's my ideal schedule. I usually stop and get a big cup of coffee when I drop my son off at school, and then I come back and get to it.

**What has been the biggest influence on your writing and the way you enjoy food and drink?**

I feel like I'm always looking at the big picture of life. I know that sounds corny, but over the past few years I've been trying to decide what constitutes a good life—basically what makes you happy and what makes a good use of time. With every decision I make I ask, "Is this going to be worth the time I put into it?" We all make choices about how we spend our time and what we put our energy into, and I'm happiest doing things that offer a simplified but sometimes unexpected way to approach something, like putting fresh fruit in biscuits or figuring out how much whole wheat flour you can put in a muffin and keep it still tasting like a delicious piece of breakfast cake.

**What were some of the biggest challenges in putting the *Smitten Kitchen Cookbook* together?**

Seasonality and accessibility proved to be two pretty big hurdles for the book. I wanted to focus on things that people could enjoy without having to feel bad about where they live, what grocery store they have or what kind of budget they're working with. There was a rhubarb wine spritzer that I wanted to include with rhubarb bitters or with a really potent rhubarb syrup, but I realized that some parts of the country don't get great rhubarb and rhubarb bitters can be hard to come by, so I didn't run it.

**Do you have a favorite recipe from the book?**

I have a few in there that I can't wait for everyone to make! I'm terrifically fond of the apple cider caramels. I think they're one of the most delicious things on earth—you just take apple cider and boil it down until it barely exists and make caramels from that concentrate. It's really just fall bliss.

**Any cooking disaster stories?**

Oh, so many! A few months back I saw this American flag cake on Pinterest—not like one of those cakes where the flag's on top with the berries and stuff, but one where you cut into it and each slice looks like a flag—well, I wish I'd never seen it. I had food dye up my arms for days, my sink was blue and the cake was a disaster, so I just shoved it in the freezer for another time.

**You've been known to infuse recipes with everything from bourbon to red wine to beer—anything to keep in mind when using beverages as a cooking ingredient?**

I think you have to keep in mind that there's a thin line between using bourbon as a flavoring and drinking a cake. There are so many liquors that have wonderful flavors to them, and I love this idea of using booze as a flavoring instead of vanilla, almond, lemon zest, but I'm not trying to get drunk from a

baked good. In the book there's a red wine–chocolate cake that I got in my head from a reader. I was obsessed from that second on, literally counting down the minutes until I could go experiment in my kitchen. And you can taste the wine. Everyone likes red wine and chocolate, and this is like a grownup birthday cake—it's so good.

**In the book you offer tips for hosting dinner parties—are there any drink staples you keep on hand for impromptu entertaining?**

I try to always keep some kind of fruit syrup in the fridge. It's a great way to use up overly ripe fruit, and aside from flavoring sodas and cocktails, if you make it thick enough you can also use it on pancakes! I also love Dolin vermouth—it seems we're getting into a vermouth revival, are we not? I feel like for a while things were getting so complicated where you needed a chemistry set to mix cocktails, but I have a hard time believing that you can taste more than three ingredients in a drink, and it's nice to see people relaxing a bit.

**Any guilty pleasures when it comes to eating and drinking?**

I love buying my coffee out. There are all these wonderful coffee shops in my neighborhood. New York is becoming much more of a coffee town than it's ever been, and it's so nice to go out and get a really well-made latte. I also really like the social aspect of it. Working from home, sometimes talking with the barista is the only socialization I get in the first couple of hours of the day! I'm also really fascinated by the French school routine of the *gôûter* at four o'clock. In some cultures you have tea time at four, which usually involves a small piece of cake, and for kids the *gôûter* is like a glass of milk and a cookie. And it's never like, "here's a bowl of grapes," it's something small and sweet, like an actual cookie. If I'm with my son we might sneak out and see if we can find a new bakery with something small and sweet to share.

**Heading into autumn, do you have any favorite fall dishes and drinks?**

Fall is my favorite time to cook—September and October, when you still have a lot of summer produce lingering, but when it gets to the point where it's actually pleasurable to get back into the kitchen and fire up the burners again. I've gotten into this idea of homey baked pastas, but in a more updated sense, like something with late-season eggplant, orzo and oregano. And I love gratins! One of my favorites from the book is a wild rice gratin, which makes this huge, hearty dish that will feed you for a week. And in terms of cocktails, I love, love apple cider and could definitely see mixing it with bourbon. Yes, apple cider and bourbon.

**web extra** 

Get the recipe for Perelman's apple cider caramels: [imbibemagazine.com/SO12](http://imbibemagazine.com/SO12)



## Wines with Attitude

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