

Food lends itself to good writing because, as M.F.K. Fisher so famously wrote long ago, writing about food often means writing about “other, deeper needs for love and happiness.” In defense of her craft and her subject, she declared: “There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine is drunk.” ■ What was true in 1943’s “The Gastronomical Me” is certainly true in

2012. If anything, the appetites seem sharper in this schizophrenic age where computerized whiz-bangeries distract us from a gray, downsized reality. Looking to feed a literal and figurative hunger are scores of food writers, chefs, food bloggers and even would-be food TV stars.

The good ones traffic in the kind of writing Fisher did, going beyond a recipe for carob-coated tofu logs dusted with chia seed, say, to the broad and mighty forces that might drive a person to eat such a thing. Yet, none need rely solely on the printed page in the Twitter era.

Still, as in Fisher’s day, the cookbook remains the veritable holy grail for most food writers, says Aaron Wehner, vice president and publisher of Ten Speed Press in Emeryville, Calif.

“I think there’s something about the book that is enduring,” he said. “I think it is a document of one’s work. There is nothing like the gravitas of a beautifully done book. For chefs, the book is still a major rite of passage. Whether a narrative book or an art-driven book, the book is still a big deal.”

Today’s food writers are savvier and more educated about food, said David Leite, who as publisher of Leite’s Culina-ria, (leitesculinaria.com) has given many a food writer exposure in his online food/cooking magazine and blog. There’s less self-indulgence, too.

“People are telling stories in the first person, but their gaze is moving up from the belly button to the world,” he said. “People are finding their niche and becoming more politicized, too.”

The danger now may be that you miss a really fine writer or story or article, said Lisa Ekus, principal of an eponymous agency in Hatfield, Mass., that represents many food writers and authors.

“How many blogs can one person follow daily, weekly?” she asked. “Today’s food writers are writing in so many different venues and platforms it’s hard to locate their work. And the sheer volume is stag-

gering.”

True. Yet the key to winnowing out the best food writers in the crowd is the same as it has always been: voice.

“I feel so strongly about voice,” said Judith Jones, the legendary Knopf editor who worked with Julia Child, James Beard, Jacques Pépin and Fisher.

“We need people interpreting cooking and telling us how to do it — and that it’s fun,” said Jones, now retired, in a telephone interview from New York City. “That’s what I really want to get across, it’s fun to work in the kitchen. It really is.”

Here are seven people who do just that.

Monica Bhide

Ask Bhide why she is a food writer, and the answer is immediate: “Food is so intimate, it touches us in ways almost nothing else does.”

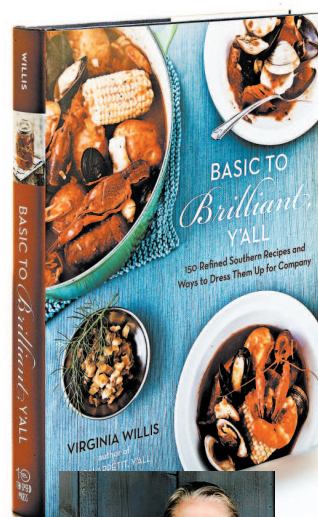
So when she writes about making butter chicken with her father, know the chicken is just the vehicle carrying the story of her dad to the reader.

Bhide has told stories in her three Indian-themed cookbooks; on her “A Life of Spice” blog at monicabhide.com; in magazines; and as a contributor to NPR’s online food page, “Kitchen Window.”

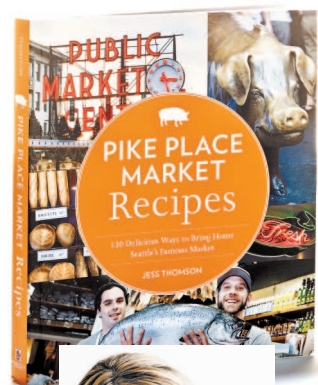
Born in New Delhi, reared in the Middle East, and now raising a family in Dunn Loring, Va., Bhide said writing filled a void in her life that engineering — a career that delighted her parents — could not.

These days, Bhide focuses more on essays involving food than recipe writing.

“I’m not the kind of person you can put in front of the stove and just let me stand there,” she said. “I need to go out in the world and explore. I want to cook out in the saffron fields.”



Virginia Willis



Jess Thomson

Chat

Visit chicagotribune.com/printersrow to join Bill Daley and the food writers for an online chat at noon, Thursday.

David Bridges

This New Orleans chef wanted to be a food writer so much that when offered a chance to write for a website by and for women, he took the pen name “Sally Bridges” and got busy.

“For me, it was just learning to be a better writer,” said Bridges, whose recent hire as chef at Upperline Restaurant has put a dent in the writing he does on his blog, TheRootertotheTooter.com. Yet, he still hopes to write a personal cookbook called “From the Rooter to the Tooter: A Southern Man’s Journey of Nose to Tail Cooking.”

This Louisiana native pitched a proposal to Judith Jones in an email. She liked what she heard — the voice was there. Then she retired. The book remains unsold and unpublished.

“When you have something as quirky as that, you have to have someone who loves it and will run with it,” Jones said. “I would have gone to bat for it. He’s an original.”

Bridges isn’t quitting.

“The writing is timeless and speaks for itself. It is quite the opposite of today’s trend of cursing, sloppy, unintelligent dribble that is dumbing down the craft. Someone has to be the voice of reason, and it might as well be me,” he said.

Michael Procopio

On this San Francisco waiter/writer’s blog, FoodfortheThoughtless.com, there’s an “Apple Brown Betty White” salute to the 90-year-old comedian and a failed recipe for “love cake” inspired by one created in a movie by Catherine Deneuve. Both items are very funny. Then there’s a posting called “Cauliflower Ears.” It is not funny at all.

In the piece, Procopio realizes why he never cooked cauliflower. Seems “cauliflower ears” was a taunt he hurled at a schoolmate named Ben who was later found killed. He ends with a pasta recipe for cauliflower and orecchiette, which means “little ears” in Italian.

“It isn’t meant so much as a pun as it is a kind of memento mori — a dish that I will add to my repertoire so that I might think of Ben from time to time, to remind myself just how short our stay in this world can be, and to make the most of what time I’m lucky enough to have left,” Procopio explained on the blog.

It’s that sort of spin on things, not necessarily the recipes, that draws readers in, he said.

“What I write is sort of what’s on my mind,” Procopio added. “I tend to answer my own questions.”

Leela Punyaratabandhu

This Chicago resident wanted to post some recipes in remembrance of her mother. Thus was **SheSimmers.com**, a blog on Thai home cooking, born in 2008. It is not a theme she had originally planned to pursue.

"I realized there were not many blogs on Thai food written in English," Punyaratabandhu said, via telephone from Bangkok. "It doesn't matter how you brand yourself. In the end, people brand you."

SheSimmers has been a success. It was named one of *Savuer* magazine's "sites we love" last year. Punyaratabandhu has begun writing columns on Thai cooking for the blog **SeriousEats.com**, where she was introduced to readers as "a scholar of philology, history, linguistics, and all things culinary." And she's filing posts for CNNGo, CNN International's Asia-centric travel website.

"My world has opened up," she said. "Food puts me in a place where people can see me. It is the food that connects them to me."

Jess Thomson

Diagnosed with lupus, this Seattle writer is now learning to follow a gluten-, soy- and egg-free diet. Her 2-year-old son has cerebral palsy. And she's had three books — four if you include the ghostwritten one on main dishes — just published or on their way.

Readers of Thomson's blog, *Hogwash*, at **jessthomson.wordpress.com**, know all about this.

"The subhead is 'Thoughts on food and life,' and it's my life and it's about me," she said.

Calling the blog *Hogwash* is an insider's nod to Seattle. Her introduction to the city took place at the Pike Place Market, whose unofficial mascot is a big bronze pig named Rachel. The market is the focus of her book, due out in May, called "Pike Place Market Recipes: 130 Delicious Ways to Bring Home Seattle's Famous Market" (Sasquatch, \$23.95).

With the book projects out of the way, Thomson has a big list of story ideas to tackle. And she's finding more editors interested in working with her.

"One of the helpful things about having a strong voice is editors get to know me easily," she said.

Michael W. Twitty

He's a food writer, yes, but also a culinary historian, a Hebrew school teacher, a living history interpreter and a proponent for social justice.

"For me, all food has meaning. All

food has import. All food is contextual," said the resident of Rockville, Md.

Twitty's focus: "the foodways of Africa, enslaved African-Americans, African America and the African and Jewish diasporas." His writings and recipes can be found on his blog, **Afroculinaria.com**. A second blog, **TheCookingGene.com**, attempts to trace his ancestry back through the centuries via food. He has also written articles for "The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America" and a soon-to-be-published book, "Rice and Beans."

For this summer, he's planning what he calls "The Southern Discomfort Tour," a culinary journey from Maryland to Louisiana and back that he hopes will result in a book or a documentary. Using his own family's enslaved past as the touchstone, Twitty wants to explore the plight of black farmers today while showing how food links to family, identity and community.

"What sets me apart from others who do this writing is I'm totally immersed in the foodways of the rural antebellum South," Twitty said. "There are not many people willing to go to the creative and mental space of the Old South, come to terms with it and look at that history. You don't want to touch it, but I will. I have to, or the story won't get told."

Virginia Willis

Having worked behind the scenes for such bold-type folks as Martha Stewart, Anne Willan and Nathalie Dupree, the Atlanta writer has been largely under the radar outside of the food community. But now she's flying solo — and her profile is rapidly gaining altitude.

"I can tell by the people calling me that something has shifted recently, and in a good way," said Willis, author of the recently published "Basic to Brilliant, Y'all: 150 Refined Southern Recipes and Ways to Dress Them Up for Company" (Ten Speed, \$35).

Willis is getting justifiable recognition as an authority on Southern cooking. Just named a contributing food editor for *Southern Living* magazine, she respects tradition but is willing to be creative, too.

But Willis doesn't want to be pigeon-holed into one cuisine — or medium.

"I think food writing is a much broader term," she said. "I can write for magazines and newspapers, do cookbooks and also write a blog."

Bill Daley is a food and features reporter for the Chicago Tribune.

Cook like them

Visit **chicagotribune.com/printers row** to link to samples of each food writer's work, including these recipes:

→ Jess Thomson's Chunky Low-Sodium Onion Dip

→ Virginia Willis's Sweet Potato Grits



→ Monica Bhide's Butter Chicken from **monicabhideo.com**



→ Michael Procopio's Cauliflower Ears from **foodforthethoughtless.com**



→ Michael W. Twitty's Mom's Pot Roast from **afroculinaria.com**



→ David Bridges's Posole Soup with Green Tomato and Brussels Sprout Salsa from **therootertothetooter.com**



→ Leela Punyaratabandhu's Shrimp Satay with Thai Peanut Sauce from **shesimmers.com**