





# Pat Sharpe

Food Writer, *Texas Monthly*

The natural: being a food writer is all in a day's work for this picky eater.

By Jessica Dupuy  
Photography by Kenny Braun

In her more than 30 years with *Texas Monthly* magazine, Pat Sharpe has managed to write or edit reviews on more than 30,000 restaurants statewide. She sets the stage for where to eat in Texas each year as countless new and innovative dining establishments pop out of the woodwork. She reveals the best and worst on sacred Texas cuisine, including barbecue, Mexican food, and steak. And her experiences have stretched beyond the national magazine of Texas, with articles published in *Bon Appétit* and *Gourmet*. She is the authority on food in the Lone Star State.

In fact, Sharpe's ability to reach a readership that considers dining out a way of life won her the distinguished "Oscar" of food writing, the James Beard Award for Magazine Feature Writing (without recipes) in 2006 for her piece "Confessions of a Skinny Bitch" in the March 2005 issue of *Texas Monthly*.

The story was a witty Q&A session in which Sharpe answered her most frequently asked questions as a food writer, the most common being: If you eat food for a living, how do you stay so skinny?

And it's true. She is skinny. But elegantly so. And without apology. After all, trying to stay healthy doesn't mean you can't eloquently evaluate a meal. There's no rule that says you have to clean your plate.

When answering a query about the unlikely marriage between a diet and a food critic, the Skinny Bitch simply states in her article, "All you do is pay attention and savor each bite."

When reviewing a meal, Sharpe approaches a plate of food with composed enthusiasm, first assessing the presentation, and usually uttering a slight "hmm," or "that's interesting." She then takes the tactile approach. Using knife and fork, she probes for textures, observes color, and notes how food combinations are layered. Finally, she assembles the perfect bite on the fork and tries a taste.

Then the discussion begins. The osso buco makes me want to curl up next to the fire with a good glass of Barolo. Does the risotto with white truffle oil rate "gummy and bland," or "buttery and divine"? How about the *panna cotta* with fresh berries—the first bite was like slicing through silk and the vanilla-bean infusion was captivating.

Many people assume that to be a professional food reviewer, you have to have a lengthy list of credentials under your belt, including a degree from a reputable culinary academy, or at least some experience in the restaurant industry. Not so.

"I think it all comes down to whether you have a palate or not," says Sharpe. "You need to have a natural curiosity to ask 'how'd they do that?' and you have to be the person who wants to pick apart the details ad infinitum until you want to tear your hair out."

Although she has taken a number of cooking classes and has read extensively on various cuisines, for Sharpe it comes down to one simple thing: "Either it comes naturally or it doesn't. If it's not your way of thinking, it probably never will be."

That's a pretty strong statement coming from someone who confesses that she did not seek out food writing. Rather, food writing found her. Sharpe remembers being a fairly picky eater as a child, but she never thought to attribute picky eating to having the palate of a food critic.

She remembers the first time she saw *Texas Monthly* on the newsstand: "I thought it was so cool. I immediately knew I wanted to work there."

After a concerted effort to get noticed by the *Texas Monthly* staff, she finally landed a role as an editorial assistant in 1974, when the magazine was still in its infancy.

"I basically started as a gofer," Sharpe recalls. "I did everything from proofreading and copy editing to answering phones." She also edited all of the events listings for the state and gained the responsibility of editing the monthly Dining Guide.

The magazine's founding editor, Bill Broyles, recognized her strength in managing the Dining Guide and encouraged her to take cooking classes. He also agreed to pay her dining expenses for an educational foray through France's Michelin-rated restaurants.

At that point she was hooked. "I was just in the right place at the right time," says Sharpe.

Such is the life of a food writer. And though there are the days when she feels she might be one step behind the beat, or that she'd rather spend the evening dining at home rather than eating another meal out, Sharpe acknowledges that the reason she loves what she does is the dining experiences she's shared with friends over the years.

"Food really is about being with people," she says. "Of course we all eat by ourselves sometimes. I've had the occasional can of tuna over the kitchen sink before, but just being with your friends and sharing a meal—that's what it's about." ■