

A LOOK INSIDE Ralph Smith's Fridge

by Renee Bruner

The photographer behind some of your supermarket's most beloved brands, Ralph Smith is also an avid supporter of Houston's burgeoning hipster chef scene and has hosted a number of unique dinners at his studio. Recently, he let us take a look inside his studio's fridge and chatted about photography, habanero salsa and his love/hate relationship with Thomas Keller's recipes.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY?

I studied commercial art at the University of Houston. Photography was just a hobby, and eventually it became an expensive hobby. I knew that I had to make some money in this, so I shot some on the side. When I graduated college, I was an illustrator for Exxon, and I met my wife there while we worked together. Then they split us up and moved me to photography. So I went there and enjoyed that, but after a while, I thought I could do it alone and broke off on my own. One of my earliest clients gave me a shot at Coca-Cola foods, and that led to Sysco foods, and those are two of the biggest

food accounts out there. There was no real master plan for me wanting to be a food shooter. I just wanted to shoot.

WHAT FOOD DO YOU FIND MOST INSPIRATIONAL TO PHOTOGRAPH?

I like everything. Everything is different and has its challenges, but I will have to say that my style is simplicity. I like things to be simple and graphic. I hate too many items in the photograph. It just seems like clutter to me. Even if I have multiple items in there, I try to use selective focus to isolate one item.

DO YOU DABBLE IN ANY OTHER KINDS OF PHOTOGRAPHY?

We shoot other things here as well. We do Hewlett-Packard and shoot other things, from cars and tractors to pacemakers. But food and beverage are what we specialize in.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PHOTOGRAPH THAT YOU'VE TAKEN?

It changes all the time. I guess the current favorite might be the Pabst Blue Ribbon can, but it will probably only be a favorite for the next six or eight months. Hopefully there will be a new favorite by then.

WHY HOUSTON?

I've been here my whole life. But I will

say that the culinary scene is getting better. I don't do a ton of work for individual restaurants; I do more for chains and food manufacturers. But it's kind of fun doing more and more with restaurants here in town and having chef dinners here. I'm enjoying that right now. There's a whole new army of these young chefs who are really pushing the envelope and trying some pretty cool stuff, so I've been trying to support that and be a part of that.

FAVORITE DISH AT ANY RESTAURANT?

The lobster tacos at Hugo's. They have my favorite dessert in town, too: the *flan de queso*.

WHAT SHOULD EVERYONE HAVE IN HIS/HER FRIDGE?

Everyone might not like this, but I'm thinking habanero salsa. I like to make my own, but I like pretty much all salsas, even Pace picante sauce. I use it every day. And you've got to have some wine in there, too.

IF YOU HAD TO EAT ONE FOOD FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

Potatoes. Mashed is the best.

DO YOU HAVE A GUILTY PLEASURE?

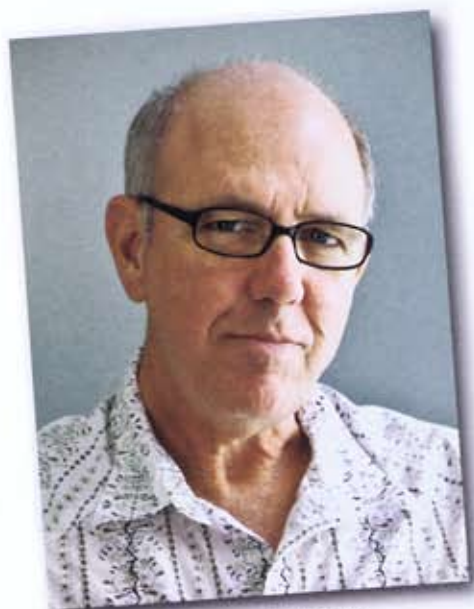
I love chips and salsa. That's the one thing that I am addicted to. It also works with my gluten-free diet.

DO YOU COOK?

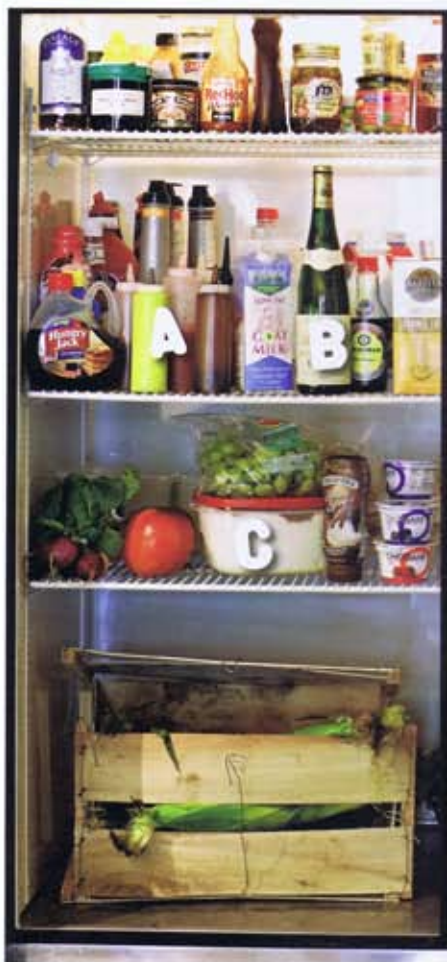
I love to cook. I like braised meats, like osso buco or braised beef short ribs. I like making them because it doesn't take much effort. You can just throw it in the oven and drink wine while it's cooking. Four hours later, it's done.

BIGGEST HOME-CHEF MISTAKE?

When I was in Boy Scouts and going for



ADRENINE BYARD FOR RALPH SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY



THE FRIDGE

Ralph Smith's studio assistant Adrienne Byard explains what is inside the fridge:

- A** Bottles that food stylists use to do their work. A food stylist is basically the makeup artist of a food shoot, and they have a whole tool chest rolling with bottles filled with things necessary to complete their job. These particular items were probably used for a drink or dessert shot.
- B** A bottle of Pinot Gris. Ralph is a big wine drinker, and this bottle was chilling for a post-work drink.
- C** Rubbermaid container full of instant mashed potatoes. Instant mashed potatoes are indispensable in food photography and are used in most of the photographs of food you see. They are the perfect consistency to help prop food upright and otherwise arrange the plate to be picture-perfect.
- D** This is the homemade hot sauce that Ralph is such a fan of. This particular sauce is made by another shooter at the studio, and Ralph puts it on damn near everything. This particular one is habanero.
- E** A case of Saint Arnold Divine Reserve No. 11. While Ralph is much more of a wine drinker than a beer drinker, he likes to be able to offer clients and friends nice and rare beers. He might drink a couple on occasion himself.

PHOTO BY RALPH SMITH

my cooking merit badge we had to make a cobbler over the campfire. We went and picked the berries on the fence line and used Bisquick, and I had this cobbler hanging on a stick over the campfire. I was stirring it, and it flipped over, and I dumped the whole thing in the fire. That's the one thing that I can't get out of my mind. I had to redo it, but in the end they did give me that merit badge.

WORST DISH YOU EVER MADE?

Once I made something out of Thomas Keller's cookbook, *The French Laundry Cookbook*, and it was for a dinner party. I wanted to do some kind of savory dessert with blue cheese, and it was a custard-type thing, and I had nice little tall shot glasses, and it sounded cool. It took me all freaking day to do it because Thomas Keller has, like, three pages and all this preparation. I remember it not being bad, but it just wasn't worth it.

LEAST FAVORITE FOOD?

I don't like liver.

CHERISHED COOKBOOK?

One of my favorites is Thomas Keller's

Ad Hoc at Home. That's a great book.

WHAT DO YOU GROW (E.G., GARDEN, BALCONY, WINDOW SILL)?

Everything! I've tried to grow everything that will grow here. We've got our lot back here behind the studio that we use to grow vegetables for photography. Lately, in the last five years, I've been trying to do a lot of edible plants in the landscape mixed in with native plants.

WHO IS YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY WORLD INSPIRATION?

It may be Noel Barnhurst. He's a food photographer in San Francisco.

WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN FIVE YEARS?

We have basically only been doing still shooting, but now we are getting into video production. Also, I would just like to expand into a bigger national market. I already do a lot of national work, but I'd like to do more and better work. That's what we're all searching for. All of us are just trying to get the beautiful image, and that's what it's all about.

WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR ASPIRING FOOD PHOTOGRAPHERS?

You just have got to live and breathe food. I like to garden, too. I like to grow food and shoot food and eat food and cook food, and you just need to immerse yourself in food. And shoot all the time. You're going to make tons of mistakes, and that's alright. Just keep shooting.

HOW DOES YOUR STUDIO FRIDGE [FEATURED] COMPARE TO YOUR HOME FRIDGE?

It's bigger. [laughs] There's less here that I eat. The things here are more for our preparation of photography. Pretty much all of it is edible. But at home, it's the typical simple home fridge with too many condiments that you never use.

Renee Bruner is a My Table intern and Rice University junior. Humbled by Ralph Smith's stunning photography, she asks that you please forgive her amateur shots in following editions of The Ice Box Chronicles. A big thank-you goes out to both Ralph and Adrienne Byard for volunteering to shoot in her stead.