

# Chef Erin French Talks Comfort Food, the Power of Entertaining, and What She's Learned Over the Past Year

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The secret to a good burger, Erin French tells me over the phone, is expensive meat and cheap buns. "I could have a burger like twice a week, every week. I'm crazy about it, whether it's pork, beef, lamb, whatever," she says. It seems like such a simple dish, yet it makes sense a burger would be one of French's favorite foods. After all, it's the ultimate comfort meal. Biting into a juicy burger, hot off the grill, is so much more than dinner. It's a feeling. Unfussy, feet in the grass, delicious meat, talking around a barbecue with friends and family. Not unlike the feeling French has cultivated as the owner and chef of The Lost Kitchen.

French was planning on medical school, but after her son was born, the self-taught chef began a catering business, eventually turning it into a supper club called The Lost Kitchen and then a restaurant with the same name. After losing everything in a 2013 divorce, she moved home to Freedom, Maine, eventually reviving The Lost Kitchen in a former grist mill. To say that it has become widely popular would be an understatement. The restaurant, which usually operates by accepting reservations via postcard, has spawned a show on Magnolia

Network this year. French has written an acclaimed cookbook, *The Lost Kitchen: Recipes and a Good Life Found in Freedom*, Maine (\$32.50, [barnsandnoble.com](http://barnsandnoble.com)), and recently released a memoir, *Finding Freedom* (\$22.49, [barnsandnoble.com](http://barnsandnoble.com)). And entertaining is at the heart of everything she does.

"I want people to feel at home," French says of walking into her restaurant, but at no point in the history of her business has creating that feeling been so essential or so challenging.

"Entertaining is so much more than just a fluffy word. It's actually something that we crave emotionally and mentally as humans to have that moment to be cared for, to have that moment to come together and be around the table and socialize," says French. "I think we all realized how important those moments of entertaining and being together and hostessing are."

The restaurant remained open throughout the pandemic but in a very different capacity. For most of 2020, they did casual outdoor lunches and dinners, reopening the dining room in early July 2021. "For a while it felt like complete chaos," says French. "We were just running around with our heads, cut off, trying to make decisions to save the restaurant and keep things moving." Cognizant that many of the small producers she buys ingredients from were relying on her orders to keep their businesses going, French created an online farmers' market, fried chicken lunches, and eventually got back to serving dinner—outside. "We really worked hard to create an outdoor space that would feel as beautiful as our indoor space where we could entertain people," says French.

If you're lucky enough to be near Freedom, Maine, you might just get to enjoy that space on a whim. French and The Lost Kitchen have begun doing casual pop-in days where they open the restaurant serving simple dishes like oysters, cheese, and wine. They announce the opening a few hours ahead on social media, so anyone nearby can stop by. For those not close enough for a taste of The Lost Kitchen, or whose postcard hasn't been picked from the random drawing, it's possible to get a taste through the TV show. For years people have come to French suggesting she open more restaurants or do a TV show, but it wasn't until the opportunity with the Magnolia Network came along that she says it felt right. "It's a story about people who make the restaurant special, from the farmers to the women who work there to our neighbors," says French of the show.

While at first glance it can appear that French's life is a dreamy fairy tale—a cute young girl in the middle of nowhere opens a restaurant in an old mill by a waterfall—French has been candid over the years that the truth is far murkier, sharing anecdotal tales about her past in her cookbook before writing her memoir. "It took a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to get here," says French. "I wanted to share that because I felt it was an important American story to share, with other women and anyone who's been fighting their own battles. From being in a toxic relationship, to struggling with addiction, to dealing with dysfunctional families and single mothers and depression, there were just so many pinpoints that I felt people could

grasp onto and could take some inspiration from and see that in the end, you know what I did to pull myself out of those lows to get to the highs and that sometimes you have to tumble to shine."

As she, like so many of us as, moves into the busy time of reopening, French is focusing on embracing and savoring what she has now. "All the produce that's starting to come in, it's like a fresh start every year. And the flowers. They're bringing me more joy than they maybe ever before. I'm just trying to keep it simple and live a good life," says French.