

Carla Hall

Female Speaker:

From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Jennifer Davin:

This is Jennifer Davin at the Library of Congress. Saturday, August 30th will mark the 14th year that book lovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The festival, which is free and open to the public, will hold evening hours for the first time ever this year in its new location, the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, D.C. Hours will be from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. For more details, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now it's my pleasure to introduce author and chef, Carla Hall, whose latest book is titled, "Carla's Comfort Foods: Favorite Dishes from Around the World." Ms. Hall runs a specialty cookie business, Carla Hall Petite Cookies, but she's best known for her lively appearances on ABC TV show, "The Chew." Thank you so much for joining us.

Carla Hall:

Oh, thank you for having me.

Jennifer Davin:

What makes comfort food comforting? How do we invest emotionally in certain dishes, and you know, how do those associations come about?

Carla Hall:

I think it come from your food memories, when you're growing up, when you have -- the food that is made in the comfort of your own home by your mother, your grandparents, your father, those formative years where you're creating food memories. And a lot of times, those are the foods that, when you have them, you are thinking back to those good times -- hopefully good times.

Jennifer Davin:

Mm-hmm. Are a lot of the recipes in your book things that are straight from the family? Can you talk about that a little bit?

Carla Hall:

My -- I'm from Nashville, Tennessee. And so I grew up having a lot of what people deem as, you know, Southern food, soul food, comfort food, macaroni and cheese, smothered pork chops, collard greens, cornbread. So that was kind of the comfort food that I grew up on. But this book is really about exploring comfort foods around the world, and not saying that they are simply fattening foods from the south. And all comfort food from the south is not necessarily fattening. So, I explore the idea of a chicken with milk gravy, and -- which we have in the south, but if you take the milk out, and you add sour cream and paprika, you could be in Hungary.

Jennifer Davin:

Oh, yeah --

Carla Hall:

But if you take the milk out, and you add heavy cream, Dijon mustard, tarragon, and white wine, you could be in France --

Jennifer Davin:

Yeah.

Carla Hall:

-- or if you take the milk out and you add habanero peppers, tomatoes, and maybe a banana, you could be in West Africa.

Jennifer Davin:

Huh.

Carla Hall:

And so, the idea that some other dishes, now with different spices, changes, but at the end of the day, for me, in my mind, it's always some other dish that I can change the perception and kind of celebrate different culture by changing spices and simple ingredients.

Jennifer Davin:

Cooking, it seems to me, is really getting around in a way that might not have been true so much 10 years ago. It's like it's percolating all through the culture as something that everybody can do. Do you find children getting excited about learning to cook these days maybe more than they used to, and not wanting to just leave it to their parents to feed them all the time?

Carla Hall:

Absolutely, absolutely. I think that it's because of the Food Network, Bravo, shows like Top Chef, Chopped, and all of the Food Network stars. These younger kids, they grew up looking at these shows. So instead of maybe Julia Childs and Jacques Pepin, the Galloping Gourmet, there were maybe three shows when I was growing up. Now, it goes rampant, and the sport of cooking sort of interests kids. So now, on some of those shows, we are being introduced to ingredients that they would normally eat, but because it seems cool, and everyone is looking at these chefs, and they're looking up to them, I think the kids are basically more adventurous with foods. I was at a grocery store doing a book signing, and there was this young kid, he was about five. And he was crying, crying, crying. And I was like, oh my gosh, why is this kid crying? And he was crying because they didn't have his sushi.

Jennifer Davin:

[laughs]

Carla Hall:

I was like, oh my god, cry on.

Jennifer Davin:

[laughs]

Carla Hall:

Little boy, you cry. You cry, you get them to get your sushi.

[laughter]

Jennifer Davin:

You know, I just -- this really -- that really strikes me, because I -- one of my dearest friends had a son who, until he was, I swear, probably 18, I don't think he ate anything except peanut butter and cereal.

Carla Hall:

Uh-huh, uh-huh.

Jennifer Davin:

So, I wonder if he's cooking his own food now. I'm going to believe that he made it through to the better stuff.

Carla Hall:

[laughs]

Jennifer Davin:

You advised folks not to make anything other than a reservation if they are not in a good mood when they set about cooking.

Carla Hall:

Right.

Jennifer Davin:

Could you talk about that a little bit more?

Carla Hall:

I think that -- I don't care if you're cooking, if you're taking out the trash, whatever you're doing, if you're not doing it with an open heart, it will fail. And I used the example of making a grilled cheese sandwich. So when your grandmother, or your mom, or whomever, your -- not to be sexist -- your dad, if the person who cares for you is making that grilled cheese sandwich, the pan is at the right temperature, the bread goes down, the cheese is lined up with the bread, the butter goes down, and it cooks slowly so that one side of the bread gets golden brown, and the cheese is melting, and then you turn it over and that over side gets golden brown, and it's hot, and it's just delicious. And then you cut that sandwich, and you can just see that oozing cheese, and it is just delicious, because you care about the person you're giving that sandwich to.

Jennifer Davin:

[laughs] You're killing me here.

[laughter]

Jennifer Davin:

I haven't had lunch yet.

Carla Hall:

[laughs] But it's true. And the person who doesn't want to do it, they slap that sandwich together, the bread is not lined up with the cheese,

it's all askew. They put some oil in the pan, they put some butter in the pan. It's too hot, they put the sandwich in anyway. It burns, they flip it over, that side burns, and it cooks so quickly that you have this burnt piece of bread, soggy, the cheese is not melted, and they're like, huh, here, you going to have it, enjoy it, whatever. You see the difference?

Jennifer Davin:

I do. On the other hand, I feel sorry for all the restaurateurs who are receiving all of these people who are cranky.

[laughter]

Carla Hall:

But I think -- I don't think they're going to be cranky if they go in there, and you know, what, this chef is making this food, and I'm okay --

Jennifer Davin:

Yeah.

Carla Hall:

-- because the responsibility is now off my shoulders.

Jennifer Davin:

Well, I know that making a reservation always has a way of making me get un-cranky real fast.

Carla Hall:

Right? [laughs]

Jennifer Davin:

Do you have any advice for people who think they just cannot cook?

Carla Hall:

I do. I think the flipside of watching cooking shows, and giving the power to those people -- "Oh, they make it look so easy. I can't do what they do, so I'm not going to try. I cannot cook." And what I would say to those people is that people can do a lot more than they think they can, but they have to own it. You have to own -- understand what you like. That is the first step to cooking, because you're going to be the one to taste the food. Also, learn simple things, like a soup, and how to build flavors, and understanding those techniques. A lot of times, people want to go from 0 to 60. They think that they have to make a fancy meal, and that's what cooking is.

Keeping it simple, keeping the taste and flavors clean is much easier, and you also feel a lot more accomplished when you're making something delicious and owning your palate. So in my book, I tend to show people step by step, and using ingredients that are approachable, and recipes that they can do during the week that don't take a lot of time. And you do those little recipes, and you build on them, and then maybe you know how to make the salmon, and now you change the spices up a little bit. So, people can cook. Whether they want to or not is the question.

Jennifer Davin:

[laughs] Well, hopefully, every family has someone who does want to cook, and will sort of take it on much or most of the time. It makes sense to me.

Carla Hall:

Yes.

Jennifer Davin:

We've been hearing from author and Chef Carla Hall, who will appear on Saturday, August 30th, in the Culinary Arts Pavilion at the National Book Festival at the Washington Convention Center. Ms. Hall, thank you.

Carla Hall:

Thank you so much for having me.

Female Speaker:

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