



Jeff Bridges picks up a guitar, but this time, it's not for a movie role. Page 31

## An appetite that spans the globe

By Vicki Hyman  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Danyelle Freeman has dined on blood sausage and silken tofu stew and corn fungus quesadillas. She's devoured Devils on Horseback (pickled pear-stuffed prunes wrapped in bacon), sought out authentic *xiao long bao*, Shanghai soup dumplings, in a distant suburb of Los Angeles, and slurped shot glasses of sake-spiked sea urchin roe and raw quail egg.

Freeman gets around.

And yet here she is, on the green wooden banquette at Spirito's in Elizabeth, a mere 10 miles from her childhood home, relishing garlic salad,



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Food writer Danyelle Freeman returns to her childhood haunt, Spirito's in Elizabeth.

mushroom pie, veal cutlet and ricotta ravioli by the glow of a wall sconce patched with electrical tape. Spirito's has changed little in 60 years. It doesn't traffic in fusion cooking or farm-to-table trends. Credit cards? Fuhgeddaboutit.

Yet this is where Freeman learned to love food, and, in a sense, where her taste for boudin noir, soondubu and huitlacoche was born.

Freeman, a former restaurant critic who runs the website [restaurantgirl.com](http://restaurantgirl.com), recently released her first book, "Try This: Traveling the Globe Without Leaving the Table" (HarperCollins, \$16.99), an account of her ever-widening appetite and a zestily written almanac of world cuisine.

Every Sunday evening, her parents would pack Freeman and her two siblings in the car and drive from safe Short Hills

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to the (as Freeman remembers it, at least) gang-riddled streets of Elizabeth for old-school Italian-American food.

She and her brother and sister return here a couple of times a year — in fact, her brother calls during our meal to check up on his take-out order — to soak up the atmosphere. "It never changes," she says admiringly. There's still no butter with the bread (Freeman's mother would slice up a stick at home, wrap it in aluminum foil and whip it out at the table). The red sauce is still thick, tangy and excellent, the ravioli as pillowy as she remembers it.

Her parents, in whose memory the book is dedicated, were not the most adventurous eaters, although they would venture across state lines for a memorable meal, like soft-shell crabs in Maryland or chocolate gelato in Little Italy. What she inherited from them, she says, is an excitement about food.

"I see life every day as three amazing opportunities — breakfast, lunch and dinner, and everything in between."

After graduating from Harvard, Freeman moved to New York to pursue various careers — acting, sitcom writing, jewelry design

— but soon discovered that her true vocation was eating, and that she could dine her way through six continents without leaving the five boroughs. "The world kept getting bigger even though I was eating in the same city," she says.

In 2006 she started her blog, taking the name from a nickname a friend gave her. Her writing caught the eye of editors at the New York Daily News, who made her their chief food critic from 2007 to 2009.

The book includes tips gleaned from countless meals out — how to get a hard-to-get reservation (try at 5 p.m. the day of, when people cancel), what to do with your napkin (put it in your lap as soon as you sit down, and leave it on your chair when you go to the bathroom), when to answer the phone at the table (never).

But the bulk of the book is a chatty, often mouthwatering soup-to-nuts tour of more than a dozen national cuisines, mostly European and Asian, with sides of history, geography and culinary anthropology, plus some self-deprecating tales of her own epicurean adventures and missteps.

"I don't intellectualize food," Freeman says. "Most people want to get something that is very gratifying, and I tell them if it's gratifying."

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