



**Sheri Castle**  
**Ferrington Village, North Carolina**

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Interviewer: Rien Fertel  
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski  
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Project: Women Cookbook Writers

**[START INTERVIEW]**

[00:00:01]

**Rien Fertel:** This is Rien Fertel of the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Monday, June 4. I am in Ferrington, North Carolina with Sheri Castle, and I'm going to have her introduce herself, please.

[00:00:15]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes. As he said, I'm Sheri Castle. I live here in Ferrington, coincidentally, and he asked me to tell you my birthdate, which is September 8, 1960.

[00:00:25]

**Rien Fertel:** All right. And I'd like to start by asking about kind of the world you grew up in. So, where did you grow up, and what did your early life look like?

[00:00:35]

**Sheri Castle:** I'm from Watauga County, North Carolina. The town that some people have heard of from Watauga County is Boone, because that's where now-Appalachian State University is located. It's a popular tourist area. But, in my mind, it is right in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I am a mountain woman, and I had the odd good fortune—it wound up being the good fortune that, shortly before I was born, my granddaddy, my dad, and his brother left the tiny rural community they lived in, which was called Zionville. Zionville is on the North Carolina-Tennessee state line. My granddaddy's house was in North Carolina, but his cows lived in Tennessee. That's how close it was, up at the top of the hill. And they moved in to town to take factory jobs. And because of that, unlike my cousins, I wound up going to school in town and, most particularly, I wound up going to an experimental elementary school in which they taught young women, mainly young women, to be teachers, in the middle of ASU's campus. In hindsight, that trajectory made a lot of difference.

[00:01:40]

**Rien Fertel:** The school trajectory—how so?

[00:01:40]

**Sheri Castle:** The school did. Well, also, because I liked school, unlike most of my cousins and so forth, and because it was in a school that was almost like a meta-school. You know, it was a school within a school. It afforded me exposure to things I would not have gotten otherwise, and they figured out pretty early—I arrived at school knowing how to read and write, and they didn't know what to do with me. So, until I was in fifth grade and they let me rejoin the class, I spent the better part of my day amusing myself. They just let me loose. And I would go to the school library, and once I exhausted everything I wanted to read there, they let me wander around ASU's campus. And I sat in on classes and I got interviewed and so forth. So, it was like this odd little bubble of immersion, self-directed education, which was unheard of in that time and place. It took me a long time to realize what an odd thing it is. Because when you're a little kid, you've got no reference point. You think whatever's happening to you is how the world works. It wasn't until I got much older that I realized that the things I was exposed to, including cookbooks—that was where I discovered cookbooks—was almost being turned loose to amuse myself where everybody else was learning to read and write.

[00:02:57]

**Rien Fertel:** Two follow-up questions about that. Were there books in your home, books or cookbooks? Was it a home with a lot of books? And, when you were in the school library and on that campus, what books immediately struck you as important?

[00:03:17]

**Sheri Castle:** I did not grow up in a home with a lot of books, no. My grandmother, who I consider my mother, my mama, was a voracious reader, but it was for pleasure, you know. Zane Grey westerns and Grace Livingston Hill pulp paperbacks. But she was a voracious reader. And my entire life, she took me to the downtown Boone public library on Monday morning until I started school, and she and I both checked out as many books as we could have and brought them home in Winn-Dixie grocery store paper bags, and

went back and replenished ourselves. Now, I don't remember how many that was. I don't remember if that was six or thirty-six, but a bag full of books. And she was a voracious reader, and we shared that love. And in the summer, she would let me sit in the middle of her bed, which felt like it had its own zip code. It felt enormous to me as a small child, and I could read until I didn't want to read anymore. And I've not hit that point yet.

[00:04:12]

**Rien Fertel:** Wow. Growing up—you called yourself a mountain girl. And growing up in that mountain family, do you think of yourself as distinct from the South? Did you think of yourself as Appalachian? Did you think of yourselves as Southerner or North Carolinian? What was your identity?

[00:04:29]

**Sheri Castle:** None of that at the time, because again, I didn't have any reference point. I did have a sense that our life was profoundly different from what I saw on television, which is true for most of us. But to go back to what books I found important in these libraries, I gravitated to the cookbooks, and I don't know why other than I seemed to have had this bizarrely developed notion as a very young child that what you ate said a lot about who you were and your station in life. And my grandmother watched soap operas. Her *stories*, as she called, in the afternoons. I would sit under the kitchen table; she did her sewing when she watched her stories. And I would sit under the kitchen table and watch these things with her. And I noticed that those people were living a lot better than we were, and I noticed that they ate dinner every day. And in my world, dinner was one meal a week that you ate after church on Sunday, and supper's what you ate through the week. And it struck me that these fancy people had found a way to do dinner daily, and I aspired to be a dinner eater, and I had some sense that that was going to be my ticket out. I also had a very early sense: I need to see more of the world than this. And so, when I would look at these cookbooks, I would discover these dishes that I did not know how to pronounce, but they seemed to be the key to some kingdom, and so between being able to read early, seeming to have sort of a natural ability to cook—like some little kids can sing in key, I

always seemed to have some sense of cooking—and all that, it sort of developed a worldview that made me curious about what was down off the mountain.

[00:06:08]

**Rien Fertel:** When you discovered that kind of innate sense of cooking, was it alongside your grandmother? Or another family member?

[00:06:12]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes and no. She was one of those stereotypical—I prefer to say storybook Southern grandmothers that could feed a lot of people. She was a cook of note within our community. Like, covered dish suppers at the church, they always say, “Well, what did Ms. Madge bring?” The foil was lifted off her dish first. I was curious about that food, but other things. I know the first recipe I ever came up with in my own head, I wrote down the recipe, I drew a picture to go with it, I wrote a story, and mailed it to a TV show when I was four.

[00:06:48]

**Rien Fertel:** Can you tell the story about what that recipe, or what that recipe was?

[00:06:51]

**Sheri Castle:** Yeah. I called it Hawaiian Tropic Sunset Delight, because I used too many adjectives back then too, just like I do now. And it was essentially what we would now call a smoothie. My grandmother had gotten a blender with Green Stamps, S&H Green Stamps were a savings thing. If you made purchases at grocery stores and some department stores, you got these stamps, and you collected them, and you redeemed them. It would now be called, like, a bonus point system. I probably belabor that point because I told the story to someone one time and they told me my family was on food stamps and that we had squandered them on a blender. Yeah. **[Laughter]** So, yeah. So, with the Green Stamps, she had this blender, and I could put fresh fruit and coconut and apple juice and called it Hawaiian Tropic Sunset Delight and mailed it to the Betty Feezor Show, which was one of those daily homekeeping shows of the era. Matter of

fact, I have this fascination with Betty. I've got to write about that someday. But anyhow, that's what I mailed in. But I remember getting my first cookbook that I owned myself. It was either for my birthday or for Christmas, when I was in eighth grade. I was thirteen, and I got a copy of the *Joy of Cooking*. And not long after that, a couple years later, I had a car and a driver's license, and I could head down off the mountain to buy groceries and was experimenting with things that I would not have found at home. I just always had a curiosity about food. Now, granted, I never meant to be a food professional. My life goal was to be an English professor and write scintillating short stories and novels. That was the life goal. The food was just a thing that interested me.

[00:08:28]

**Rien Fertel:** Okay, we'll get to that but I want to ask one more question. When you were doing this cooking at home, I guess in high school, were you feeding just family, friends?

[00:08:37]

**Sheri Castle:** Some of my family wouldn't touch it and still don't eat what I cook. They're very suspicious of it. It's too foreign. Too foreign. My grandmother will eat anything I made, and I've had my friends, my schoolteachers, enjoyed—when you come in and make crêpes with Mornay sauce for the French club, that's big doings at Watauga High School in the [19]70s. Some of my friends' parents were professors, and they were—I made good food, and people were curious about it. But I didn't feed my family with this. There's probably a lot of complicated reasons, I've not explored why that is, but my grandmother would eat anything I brought home—and when I came, I was first-generation college, and they would not let me leave the state of North Carolina. That was the only utterance made about my schooling is, “Well, you can go do this if you think you must. But you cannot leave North Carolina.” So, I came to the University of North Carolina. That became the most feasible option. And I found again, through grocery stores, there was a gourmet market in Durham, and I started taking tofu and goose and star anise and things like that. And again, it was for personal curiosity and it delighted my grandmother. And that was sufficient grace for all of that.

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**Rien Fertel:** And just for the record, can we get her name, your grandmothers' name?

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**Sheri Castle:** Her name was Madge Marie Reese Castle. Yeah.

[00:09:56]

**Rien Fertel:** So, you go to UNC for college?

[00:09:58]

**Sheri Castle:** I did, I did.

[00:10:00]

**Rien Fertel:** Okay. Do you major in English?

[00:10:01]

**Sheri Castle:** Well, I started out majoring in English. I came in with, because I had been able to take what few honors classes they had and these things at ASU, I came in as a second semester sophomore. So I had to stretch it to stay four years, because it was the promised land. And I took enough hours to be an English major, but I wasn't finished, and my dad had a dim view of English as a major because he had sent me to get a job. And so, I wound up, my degree was within the journalism school, and it was in broadcasting communications. So, I did that to placate him, but I still wound up taking more classes in English than anything else.

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**Rien Fertel:** Wow. I want to ask this question because I just got finished with an interview with Ronni Lundy. When you moved to Chapel Hill—on a map it's only a couple hours away, but I imagine it's two very distinctly different places at that time. Meeting new people in Chapel Hill, did you get a sense that, because you were from the Appalachians, because you grew up in the mountains, was that ever seen as—because of the Southern

Appalachians' long history as a pejorative in America, did you run up against that, people saying, you know, "Oh, you're from up there," and asking questions that were unbecoming, or anything like that?

[00:11:29]

**Sheri Castle:** That, it did not happen from my peers in college. The first time—I experienced that later in other forms, and it wasn't as drilled down to Appalachian problems, it was more the cloak of Southernness. I got some grief over that. My thing was—now, they did notice my colloquialisms. They would say I had interesting phrases, and they said that my accent came on strong when I talked to my Dad on Sunday nights, which probably makes sense. But beyond that, it didn't come up at all. And I'm not sure why about that. My being stereotyped as a mountain person—the only flavor I had gotten of that, because you can remember, I'd just lived around my like kind until that. But the summer before I came to Carolina, I worked in a fancy, high-end resort in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, which is where the rich people vacationed, and was asked questions that curl my toes to this day. Matter of fact, day before yesterday, I was talking about Appalachian food and I brought this up. I was asked, did I know how to read and write? Had I ever had a pair of shoes before I got that job? And they wanted to know if I had children and things like that. And I was incredulous. I will say that I railed more against feminist issues than geographic stereotypes back then. That was the biggest feather in my cap back then. I didn't know the word feminist, but that's what I was, and that was a bigger fish to fry.

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**Rien Fertel:** How did those feminist issues pop up?

[00:13:01]

**Sheri Castle:** I think it was because, being a girl, and seeing that that was an impediment in my community, that seemed to be the biggest injustice I had experienced in those first seventeen years. I had suffered more from being a female than from being a mountain person. I also had the good fortune that, when I got to Carolina, I was a very robust

student. And that gives you skills, even if you don't know you're wielding it. That gives you skills to avoid some conversations.

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**Rien Fertel:** What do you mean by that?

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**Sheri Castle:** I think that, if I had been a poor, stupid hillbilly instead of a poor, academically robust hillbilly, I might have gotten more grief off of that.

[00:13:48]

**Rien Fertel:** From fellow students?

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**Sheri Castle:** And from faculty.

[00:13:51]

**Rien Fertel:** Oh, faculty. Yeah.

[00:13:53]

**Sheri Castle:** Exactly, exactly. But even now, even, I've gotten more pushback in the last ten years over being a mountain person than I ever had in my first forty years. There was a pretty well-known journalist that was interviewing me a few months ago, and she said, she said to me at the end of the interview, she says, "You know, you sound so stupid. But you're really not."

[00:14:20]

**Rien Fertel:** She used those words?

[00:14:20]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes. She did. And you could tell that she was trying to offer me a consolation prize or something. I mean, it was such—I think she was not only sharing her epiphany, she thought she was bettering me by saying, “You're not nearly as stupid as you sound.” And I said, “Well, it's because I know the difference between dialect and intellect. It goes a long way.”

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**Rien Fertel:** Ah—okay—you're at UNC, you're majoring in communications, you're taking classes. Are you writing?

[00:14:58]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes. I thought I was going to be a fiction writer. I've always had a way with words. And then I wound up getting into some pretty serious academic writing. I had a flair for it. Matter of fact, the first time I was going to graduate school, and didn't go, it was for, not technical writing, but doing really in-depth research on how people interact with media. So my honors thesis at Carolina, there were two researchers in Israel that were exploring a system of thought that was pretty popular at the time called Uses and Gratification Theory, on why people obtain and what they get from media. And that interested me. I had written about that quite a bit. And then I always earned my keep as a writer. I mean, when I got out of college and realized that graduate school wasn't an option right then, I got a job working for a law firm, because I knew how to haul my butt down to the Supreme Court library—because nothing was online then—and write amicus curiae briefs. I did legal research and writing. The little postscript, interesting note on that, that wasn't interesting at the time was, my first boss was John Edwards.

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**Rien Fertel:** That is interesting—the future—?

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**Sheri Castle:** Yes. But anyway, that's just a little postscript. Then I went and was a writer for a broadcasting company. I was in corporate communications. And then, my last corporate

writing job was for IBM. I started out as a technical writer, and that's when I realized that, if you can form a good sentence, you don't have to necessarily know what you're talking about. I don't recommend it, but I wrote for years about software I did not understand at all. And then, my last thing within IBM is they were reorganizing and they were bringing ad agency work back in house. I worked for an in-house ad agency doing early forms of computer-based training and white papers and all that. So, I've always earned paychecks as a writer. The food thing didn't pop up until the late [19]90s.

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**Rien Fertel:** Okay. And before we get to the food thing, when you were writing stories and experimenting with fiction, were the stories locally-focused? Were they Southern? Were they Western North Carolina?

[00:17:03]

**Sheri Castle:** They were not Western North Carolina. I was still fleeing my past at the point, so they definitely weren't. Matter of fact, I don't believe in my fiction—which I've not touched in a long time—I ever had a sense of place on that. I write about the food of Western North Carolina now, but that's a different thing. No, they were interesting characters that talked too much. Wonder where that came from. **[Laughter]** Yeah. I remember all of my fiction teachers—I used to take fiction writing at Duke and stuff, and they're like, “You've got dialogue down, but you simply have to have these people stand up and go outside once in a while.”

[00:17:38]

**Rien Fertel:** Some action, right?

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**Sheri Castle:** Yeah, yeah.

[00:17:40]

**Rien Fertel:** And this whole time, when you're doing these various kind of corporate writing jobs, were you in Chapel Hill or the Triangle?

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**Sheri Castle:** In the Triangle. I have, except for a short, really short time that I lived in Birmingham, Alabama to work for a magazine, I have never changed my address from North Carolina. I've been down off the mountain, it'll be forty years in August, and my dad still thinks it's a phase I'll outgrow. That surely, to God, I'll come home.

[00:18:02]

**Rien Fertel:** So he's still there?

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**Sheri Castle:** Oh, all of them are. All of them are still there. I'm the only one that ever left.

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**Rien Fertel:** And they know that, any day now, you'll move back?

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**Sheri Castle:** Well, yes, because I still think that that is their baseline. And sometimes, I've got to tell you, when it's ninety-five degrees and 110% humidity and I'd go up and sit in his backyard and not sweat in August, he may be on to something.

[00:18:24]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. Just one question about your parents, you said he worked, he did factory work. What did he do?

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**Sheri Castle:** He started out working in a factory. In the late [19]50s, they built several factories in the mountains. I don't know why there. That would be a good thing to explore. But I don't know why. He started out working on the factory floor of a company that made

miniature electronics, resistors, potentiometers, things like that. And that was back in the day with a high school education, you could work your way up. And he wound up running the Sales Engineering Department. Yes. And my mother kept the books and was office manager in the town funeral home.

[00:19:02]

**Rien Fertel:** Huh.

[00:19:04]

**Sheri Castle:** Um-hmm.

[00:19:04]

**Rien Fertel:** Did you have siblings?

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**Sheri Castle:** No. It's the only smart thing they ever did. **[Laughter]**

[00:19:10]

**Rien Fertel:** When did the first food writing job or assignment come along?

[00:19:14]

**Sheri Castle:** I decided in—my daughter was born in 1995, and I went on a family leave. IBM had generous family leave back then—unpaid, but you could take the time off. I decided, during that, that I was not going to return to IBM.

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**Rien Fertel:** And how old were you then?

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**Sheri Castle:** Mid-thirties.

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**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

[00:19:31]

**Sheri Castle:** And I told my then-husband, it was around Thanksgiving. I said—because IBM, it was the late [19]90s, they were offering packages for people to downsize, and they were, like, insane packages, like multi years of your salary and your insurance, re-education money, and I was going to have to resign in February. And I said around Thanksgiving, “They need to offer a year-end package and pay me to quit.” And by God, they did. I just conjured that right up, like the next week. So, I let them pay me a goodly sum to leave my job. And I knew then that I wanted to be a cooking teacher. Not a restaurant person, but I wanted to be a teacher because of the story of food. I like telling them, I like hearing them. And I have some technical competence in cooking. So, I did that for a while. It took a few professional cooking courses to corroborate what I thought I knew. And put my baby in a stroller, put on my one good outfit, and wheeled myself into the Williams Sonoma at Crabtree Valley Mall in Raleigh. It was the only Williams Sonoma in several states at that time. And said to the young woman at the counter, who became a friend of mine, but I'd never seen her, “Would you ever want any cooking classes?” She said, “How about Saturday?” She's not like, “Who are you? Can you cook?”

[00:20:46]

**Rien Fertel:** Like that.

[00:20:46.09]

**Sheri Castle:** Honestly. It is—if I were to write this in a script, people would say, “Oh, I think you've skipped some transitions here.” But it really did happen like that. And I started teaching cooking classes for Williams Sonoma, then I taught in my home. I did that and, about five years into that, a woman came to my class on a Sunday afternoon. And on the next day, she called me, e-mailed me, communicated in some way, and said, “I really enjoyed myself. Have you ever done any writing? Because you're articulate.” And I said, “Yes, I have.” Left it to that. “Yes, I have.” She said, “Well, would you—I am the editor

of a local publication." It was called *The Spectator*. It was one of those free arts and entertainment weeklies. And she said, "Would you like to write a piece for us?" I'm like, "Sure." I think she paid me twenty-five dollars, and I did that the next week. And it was so successful, she called the next week. She said, "Would you like to have a column?"

[00:21:41]

**Rien Fertel:** Do you remember what that piece was? That first piece?

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**Sheri Castle:** Had something to do with what I make for Christmas dinner.

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**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

[00:21:46]

**Sheri Castle:** And I know the opener, but I don't remember the end. But I remember the opener.

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**Rien Fertel:** What was the opener?

[00:21:51]

**Sheri Castle:** The opener was is that my family always had to take a picture of all the set table with all the food on it, and I don't know why, because I don't ever recall seeing those pictures. But there was this big to-do that, before we could sit down, we had to take a picture of the table. And that was my opening scene.

[00:22:11]

**Rien Fertel:** Did it have recipes?

[00:22:11]

**Sheri Castle:** I believe it did, but I don't remember. It probably did. It probably did.

Coincidentally, that same year that she asked me to do that was the first year that *Southern Living* magazine ran an annual recipe contest, and I won it.

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**Rien Fertel:** What was the recipe?

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**Sheri Castle:** It was for something I still make. It was for a seared beef tenderloin with balsamic béarnaise sauce.

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**Rien Fertel:** And this was just like, submit your favorite recipe? It can be anything?

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**Sheri Castle:** Yes, exactly. It had to be something holiday related.

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**Rien Fertel:** Holiday, okay.

[00:22:40]

**Sheri Castle:** But it was open to the—I did not know that there were people that entered these things professionally. I didn't know anything. Remember, I used to be a technical writer. And writing a recipe, the headnote is literature. A recipe is a lab report. And that has served me well all these years. So, I won it. And so, I wound up having this column and that recipe. And somebody, a local person that I cannot name, was going to do—I shouldn't have even said local. There was a person in North America who was writing a cookbook and hired me to ghost their cookbook. I didn't even have the term, I didn't even know that ghostwriting was a thing, and I wrote that person's first two cookbooks. And word got around, and I started doing ghosting and recipe development for a number of Southern chefs. And despite doing that, from about the year 2001-ish, took me ten years

to get my first book contract, because I would have all these nondisclosures. I could not tell anyone, “I've written all these books.” No one would take a chance on me, because I could not present my body of work. I still do a lot of ghosting for people.

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**Rien Fertel:** I want to ask about that, but when you got that first call to ghost book those first books, were you hesitant? Did you know immediately that you could do it, or were you hesitant that, well—?

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**Sheri Castle:** No, I knew I could do it.

[00:24:14]

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

[00:24:16]

**Sheri Castle:** I have always—I shouldn't say—that's not true. I did not doubt my ability to write about food. I knew how to cook. I knew how to write. Now, did I have any sense that it was going to become this? It was never planned. Naiveté has always served me better than ambition, because if you're naive, you don't know what you're up against. I also never had an end goal. It was something I could do at home. I still had a toddler. She paid me a pittance and wound up making me buy my own copy of the book. It was a real education in things I did not know I was learning at the time. And then, finally in 2011, I got my—oh, I've got to say one more thing about the *Southern Living* recipe contest. Talk about almost but not quite. That was their first year, and my grand prize was a thousand dollars, which is nothing to sneeze at now, but I gotta tell you, as a stay-at-home mom, it felt like winning the lottery. The next year, first prize was a hundred thousand dollars.

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**Rien Fertel:** Whoa, really? That big?

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**Sheri Castle:** Yeah.

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**Rien Fertel:** And it was printed in the magazine?

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**Sheri Castle:** Oh, yes. I still get mail about that. There are people, it'll be twenty years this December. I still get people that talk about the recipe. And of course, the irony is that I've written hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of recipes for them now, but that was my first one. My first-ever printed recipe was in a community cookbook in Watauga County. My first national magazine was *Southern Living*.

[00:25:49]

**Rien Fertel:** Have you amassed a—what does your cookbook collection look like? Especially in [19]95. Had you amassed a large cookbook collection, were you, did you just have favorites?

[00:25:55]

**Sheri Castle:** Not a lot. I didn't use a lot of cookbooks. I was trying to teach myself—now, sometimes I would go to something for technique. To the *Joy of Cooking*, a couple books like that. It's like, okay, how do you do a reduction and beat in butter? But once I had that skill, then I just used it.

[00:26:15]

**Rien Fertel:** Um-hmm. So, you're writing recipes. Were you also getting calls to write essays, more personal essays?

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**Sheri Castle:** Not so much of that. I still had my little column, which was personal, in *The Spectator*. That went—that went about a year and a half, and then the company was sold and things changed, and I didn't do it anymore for them. I would say, until maybe the first ten years of that, it was people who wanted me to write recipes. Recipes and headnotes. None of it was first person. Nobody wanted me to be me back then. They wanted me to be the better version of them.

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**Rien Fertel:** Did that feel okay, because you're making money?

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**Sheri Castle:** Well, it was work. It was work, you know? In hindsight, I feel differently about it now than I did then. Back then, it was just some work I could do and still be a stay-at-home mom.

[00:27:08]

**Rien Fertel:** And that brings me to the next question. The favorite thing that I've read of yours is—and I want to know if you have any thoughts or memories about writing this piece, but it's something, it's an essay called “Cornbread Communion.” It's in *Cornbread Nation III*, which I think came out in 2005.

[00:27:24]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes, yes. Right, right.

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**Rien Fertel:** And it's a super personal story. It's a short essay. It also reads in a way as a, it could be read as a fictional short story, in the language and the imagery. It's just, it's a really excellent piece. Was that one of the first personal essays you wrote?

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**Sheri Castle:** It was. And I know exactly. I wrote that in one take. I wrote that in about an hour off the top of my head.

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**Rien Fertel:** Wow.

[00:27:58]

**Sheri Castle:** Because I think sometimes you have stories in you, and it just needs to— something needs to take the lid off. I had, by then, started going to professional food writing symposia. There used to be this prestigious gathering of food writers from around the country at the Greenbrier every year, the Symposium of Professional Food Writers. And I had been to one. And it was both very good and very awful for me. It intimidated me horribly, horribly. And then, I went to—with a subset of this group, I can't remember if it was the same year or a year later—I went to Italy for the first time. That's where I had my hillbilly epiphany. That's where I realized that I was incredibly lucky to be from a place that was a place. And I've written about this whole going to the mountains of Italy to realize that. And it was shortly after that that I sat down and just wrote that. It wasn't for anybody. It was for me. It was for me. And I don't remember—I know what it was. I sent it to John T., because I had met him by then. This was, early in John T.-ness. And he, I believe, is the one that sent it to Ronni [Lundy], who was editing that issue of *Cornbread Nation*, and they were the first people to print it.

[00:29:13]

**Rien Fertel:** Really?

[00:29:13]

**Sheri Castle:** Yeah. But I did that for me. And I've written a couple other things that just came from some sort of fount in me. I don't mean to over-romanticize this, but that's actually how it happened. And I knew it was special. I didn't know what was going to become of it, though.

[00:29:32]

**Rien Fertel:** It is special. And it's a beautiful piece. And reading it, you feel, oh, you've done this assignment and you drove two hours back west and reported it.

[00:29:38]

**Sheri Castle:** No, no, no. These men I'm talking about is my granddaddy and dad, and they all collect antique farm equipment. Had these old mills and stuff like that. No, these were people I knew.

[00:29:50]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. Was there ever any pushback from family or internally, maybe, or from the community, as you were becoming a food personality?

[00:30:06]

**Sheri Castle:** I don't think they know that that's what I do. If you were to—and I don't recommend doing this—go to the Boone—look up all the Castles and Reeses and stuff and call them, there might be two that could tell you that. They'll probably say, “I think she cooks.” They have no idea what I do.

[00:30:24]

**Rien Fertel:** That you're always traveling and doing media appearances.

[00:30:23]

**Sheri Castle:** They have no idea. Definitely, yeah. I have one of my mother's sisters and my dad. If I tell him—if it's on a station he can get, I will tell him. Of course, he's proud. I'm still his little girl, you know. But I can be on there, not because of food. It wouldn't matter why I was on. He's just like, “My girl's on the TV. Oh.”

[00:30:49]

**Rien Fertel:** Interesting. So, when did you find an agent and get really involved in the business? Was that at Greenbrier?

[00:30:57]

**Sheri Castle:** No, I met some agents there and I blew some opportunities for a variety of reasons. I decided—how I was able to write my first book with my name on it was UNC Press approached me, and they said, “Do you have anything you'd like to write about?” And apparently it'd been building up, because a week later, I had a proposal. And they gave me that opportunity, which led to everything else. I will always be grateful for them for being willing to publish my first book. I also think that they were expecting some little, tiny thing. It's four hundred and sixty-seven thousand words, and three hundred and sixty recipes. It was a tome. And I think I thought I had to pour a lot in it because I might not ever have a second chance.

[00:31:41.08]

**Rien Fertel:** So you knew—the breadth of the book is farming, CSA boxes—

[00:31:49]

**Sheri Castle:** Right, right.

[00:31:49]

**Rien Fertel:** So you knew that was building up in you, this book needs to be out there?

[00:31:53]

**Sheri Castle:** Right, right. Yes. I thought that the book would be useful, and I'm gratified that it is. I mean, people come up to me in airports and say, “I think you're the person that wrote that book.” I mean, people will come and hold my hand and weep and tell me their personal reaction to the book. That's as good as it gets.

[00:32:09]

**Rien Fertel:** Why do you think the book affects people like that?

[00:32:13]

**Sheri Castle:** I think because—the recipes work, and I think because it's a storybook. It's a storybook with recipes. I told some stories with some voices and some recollections that resonate with them as either similar to theirs—I think there is veracity to my work. And that people like that. I also—they're like, “You found a way to say what I've been thinking.” And it makes them feel validated.

[00:32:38]

**Rien Fertel:** When you say the recipes work, what's the difference between a recipe—and there's the obvious difference—but what is the real difference between a recipe that does work and does not work?

[00:32:50]

**Sheri Castle:** To me, if it winds up being—if there is a fairly narrow, shallow chasm between my intention and their outcome, that's a pretty good recipe. At the end of the day, if it suits them, I consider that successful. It's interesting, I am a very technically precise cook, but it comes across as good advice. It doesn't come across as didactic. It comes across as pretty good advice. I write recipes the way if—I'm at the farmer's market on Saturday mornings, somebody comes up and says, “What is that and what would I do with it?” I write like I chat. And that helps people.

[00:33:32]

**Rien Fertel:** And do you, is that something you practiced or is that just a very natural way when you put your words on the page?

[00:33:38]

**Sheri Castle:** It was a natural thing. I would like to think I have gotten better, but I have never—I've never—I'm trying to think, is that true? I mean, yes. I try to become a better writer and a better cook all the time, but there's never been a grand game plan. I think it's been more of a natural evolution of my skills and experiences. And I still—and I don't mean this in false modesty—it still blows my mind that people have regard for my work. Like I

just got back from a pretty major wine and food festival, and some pretty badass people came up and said, “Oh, my God, you are so good at what you do.” And that shocks me.

[00:34:21]

**Rien Fertel:** And why? Is that just personal acceptance?

[00:34:24]

**Sheri Castle:** I don't get out much. I stay at home and work a whole lot. I have, for better or worse, I don't read a lot of reviews of my work. And my reason is, if it is poppycock, if it's just people throwing hay—and I've gotten death threats over recipes before. It will eat me up. And I can't work if something's eating me up. I always try to think, “Who is this for?” My work is for home cooks, who are my heroes. Everything I do, at the end of the day, is: this is for home cooks. And I need to remember, really fancy restaurant chefs aren't reading my stuff to begin with, so I have no need to impress them.

[00:35:13]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. How do you build a recipe? Can you take us through, step-by-step, in a quick way?

[00:35:18]

**Sheri Castle:** It comes all sort of different things. Sometimes, I build recipes because that's what the assignment is. But if I'm building something which is just where I come up with it, the closest analogy I can come up with is, when people tell me what it's like to write a song. First of all, I don't have to reprove certain culinary principles. I did not have to get up this morning and wonder if water was going to boil. I don't have to tell you if chlorophyll is going to denature an acid. I have a set of cooking principles and knowledge that I know are true, and I have a knack for flavor. And it just seems to be my lucky gift. Some people can paint; some people can draw; some people can sing. I can cook. And the more you do, the better you get at it. I know things that are not going to work. I know things that are going to work, and I know things that ought to work. And so I get a notion, and sometimes I hit it on the first try. Sometimes it takes eight tries, and sometime's it

like, this just didn't work. Either I'm not technically competent enough to do this, this is not obtainable by any home cook anywhere, this is just too esoteric, or it was a bad idea. So, I don't have the same process. But when I am writing a recipe for publication, it is not the same as just cooking. It's a lab report. I have to measure and weigh and weigh and measure and measure and do and re-do and so forth. I have colored pens, I have legal pads, I have a laptop, I have an iPad, I have tape with stuff on the walls. I mean, I'm a mad scientist, because my goal is for things to be repeatable and reliable. Again, I think that is because of some of the training I had earlier in my career, has led to that. So I think in an art form, and then I get pretty serious when I write it down.

[00:37:07]

**Rien Fertel:** That training, you're talking about the technical writing?

[00:37:08]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes.

[00:37:10]

**Rien Fertel:** Okay.

[00:37:11]

**Sheri Castle:** And even in my media research, the Uses and Gratification Theory about—if you're doing a robust research instrument, reliability and repeatability, some of those concepts are true in a cookbook too.

[00:37:23]

**Rien Fertel:** Absolutely. It seems like the same common thread going on.

[00:37:23]

**Sheri Castle:** Exactly, exactly.

[00:37:26]

**Rien Fertel:** And you're just doing that for an audience. You're the—

[00:37:28]

**Sheri Castle:** Right, right.

[00:37:28]

**Rien Fertel:** Huh.

[00:37:28]

**Sheri Castle:** Now, when I write, that's a different thing. I try to write things that are good, and there are times I'll go back. I know—although it's not deliberate, I am grateful that I have a way with words.

[00:37:47]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. We've been talking a lot about the technical. I'm going to embarrass you, maybe, for a bit. One of the earlier interviews I did for this project, when I said I was on my way to interview you in a bit, she said, “Oh.” She said, “Out of all of us—” and she meant out of, kind of this generation of cookbook writers, Southern cookbook writers today, she said, “Out of all of us, Sheri Castle has the best palate. Her palate is extraordinary.” Do you think of yourself as having an extraordinary palate?

[00:38:21]

**Sheri Castle:** I do. I do. And again, it's a gift. You know? I have brown eyes and a palate. But I do. I'm one of those people, I can taste something and tell you exactly what it's in it. I can deconstruct technique and know where something went wrong or where something went right. People rely on my palate. I get a lot of calls in the dark of night from restaurant chefs saying, “I have a problem and you need to fix it.” I have been flown into cities where really major Beard Awarded cookbooks were in the ditch, and I'm in a hotel room trying to get people to talk to each other again and fix that book. I am a fixer in many ways on things. And yeah, I have a palate, and I know—I have a knack of knowing how to make things better than they were.

[00:39:13]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. Well, but that's a totally different thing. You actually get people to talk again? You've done that?

[00:39:18]

**Sheri Castle:** I have done that on some occasions, yes.

[00:39:22]

**Rien Fertel:** How do you—so you're like a mediator.

[00:39:24]

**Sheri Castle:** I haven't had to do that a lot. But sometimes—writing a cookbook is a fraught thing. **[Laughter]** It is. And sometimes, that has been my role, is to get it back on schedule, make the food better than it was, and get the people to talking again. But no, I do have a good palate, and that serves me well. If you're going to try to describe food for a living, the more ways you can come at that as sensory perception, the better. The best piece of writing advice I ever got was not writing advice necessarily, but when people ask me how to be a food writer, I tell them this: I was at a thing in California fifteen or eighteen years ago, and someone was talking about writing about wine, which I have never done and will never do. But she said, “Make yourself practice sensory perception.” She said, “Take a moment. Preferably daily.” I don't always remember daily. “And perceive something. Perceive the sound of a blowing vent. Perceive how the light is too bright on the edge of your glasses. Perceive something and apply adjectives to it. And don't say, water is wet. Apply adjectives to a sensory perception.” It's the best food writing advice I've ever gotten.

[00:40:43]

**Rien Fertel:** It really is. That's great, I think, general advice. I know a lot of people with extraordinary palates, with super palates, sometimes, things can be overwhelming. Is there anything that, taste-wise, you avoid because it's too much?

[00:41:00]

**Sheri Castle:** There are things. And this is a critical difference of being a food writer. I can write an extremely well-crafted, reliable recipe on something that I do not personally like, because those are different things. If I'm helping a chef write a book, or someone else write a book, my job is to articulate their food as effectively as possible on the page. That doesn't mean it's a dish I like. Now, if somebody says, "Take my recipes and fix them, make them taste good," then my palate is the arbiter. It's not when it's theirs. And yes, there are—like any other person, there are things I do not care to eat, but I don't get—I am more my sensory overload tends to come from my other senses, not from how things taste. I'm not a super-taster. I'm a very accurate taster. And I'm glad I'm not a super-taster, because it would eliminate a lot of things that they just can't take it.

[00:41:56]

**Rien Fertel:** Right, right, right. So, your first cookbook came out in 2011, your follow-up came out three years later, I believe.

[00:42:02]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes. I have five with my name on it. I've written sixteen-ish books, but about five. So, *The New Southern Garden* came out in 2011. It will always be my baby. It keeps plugging along. I signed a stack of them in Atlanta yesterday. People still love that book. And then the next one that had my name on it was something I did for *Southern Living*, it's about community cookbooks: the *Southern Living Community Cookbook*. Then I did a little Short Stack edition, which are little single-volume, beautiful little books out of Brooklyn on a single topic, and I did rhubarb.

[00:42:36]

**Rien Fertel:** Can I ask you about that real quick?

[00:42:36]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes.

[00:42:36]

**Rien Fertel:** Why did you—I think a lot of those, you get to pick your own.

[00:42:43]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes, yes.

[00:42:43]

**Rien Fertel:** Why'd you pick rhubarb?

[00:42:45]

**Sheri Castle:** The first two things I pitched, somebody else I had done. I thought, what do I really love? Because when they approached me—I was very lucky, they approached me. I thought, “What do I really love that no one else will have picked?” I thought, “I adore rhubarb,” which is not Southern, of course. It's mountain food, it's not Southern food. And it's been a handy little book. The thing that helped that was, the most, was Nigella Lawson loved it. And she gave me some international love. So, that book has actually done well in Europe.

[00:43:17]

**Rien Fertel:** Really?

[00:43:17]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes.

[00:43:17]

**Rien Fertel:** Where rhubarb grows like weeds. **[Laughter]**

[00:43:19]

**Sheri Castle:** Where rhubarb is ubiquitous, exactly. Yeah, I've gotten some letters from people in Canada over—rhubarb, yes. Then the next one I did that has my name on it, I had two

come out. My name's on the title page but not the cover, but I did get the authorship credit. I wrote—Le Creuset Cookware, the French, hired me to write the first French cookbook for the American audience from them, because, again, I've got some technique. And then I wrote a book that is a companion piece to a Broadway show. I got a call from a Broadway show one day, and they sent me the dialogue and the lyrics, and I had to draw and make recipes from a Broadway show, which was kind of fun.

[00:44:01]

**Rien Fertel:** That's all they gave you? I really wanted to ask you. It's the *Waitress*, is the show—

[00:44:07]

**Sheri Castle:** Exactly. And what it is, there was a movie and then a show, and it's all about someone who bakes pies to express her emotions. Everything was a plot point or a rhyme scheme, but there were sometimes references to pies, either by name or something, and I had to take those and turn them into something that someone was willing to eat. And I had thirty days.

[00:44:25]

**Rien Fertel:** Thirty days.

[00:44:25]

**Sheri Castle:** Yeah.

[00:44:27]

**Rien Fertel:** How many recipes?

[00:44:29]

**Sheri Castle:** Forty.

[00:44:29]

**Rien Fertel:** Wow.

[00:44:29]

**Sheri Castle:** But I probably made a hundred and twenty pies to get down to the forty that we used.

[00:44:34]

**Rien Fertel:** Wow.

[00:44:35]

**Sheri Castle:** Yeah. Because it had to both support the plot and be edible.

[00:44:39]

**Rien Fertel:** What is the most—trying to figure out ways to ask you questions about ghostwriting cookbooks. What is the most distance you've had from a project and still be able to produce a book? Have you ever, like, never met the person?

[00:44:55]

**Sheri Castle:** Oh, I've never met the people. I've never met the people. And usually, I might get one conversation, but normally, there's no conversation. Usually, it's their PR firm talking to my agent. And sometimes, there's a theme. Sometimes, it's up to me to come up with a theme. One time, I got a restaurant menu that somebody had gotten a pink highlighter and highlighted some dishes, and that's the only direction I got. Usually, there is a PR or a branding firm that knows what they want that book to accomplish, and it's up to me to figure out, to come up with the recipes and the false narrative to corroborate their brand identity. You know? Aunt Pitty Pat's pie, something I came up with at my house. There is no Aunt Pitty Pat. **[Laughter]** I did, one time—this anecdote really amuses people—

[00:45:47]

**Rien Fertel:** So, you're creating backstory too, narrative.

[00:45:49]

**Sheri Castle:** Oh, yeah. It's all, yeah. See, I'm writing fiction after all. I was flown to New York one time and picked up in a black car and taken to a hotel room because someone was going to be on the Today Show the next day, and I had a couple hours in that hotel room to teach them enough about the recipes in the book that they could be on the Today Show the next day.

[00:46:15]

**Rien Fertel:** Wow.

[00:46:16]

**Sheri Castle:** And sometimes, I will always get paid more to be somebody else than to be me. That's just a fact. Some days, I'm amused by that, and some days, I'm mad as hell.

[00:46:25]

**Rien Fertel:** And I want to ask about the mad as hell part, because there's, of course, the cookbook industry like the book industry has ghostwriters, but they also have co-authors. We could just pull a name out of a hat, like a famous co-author would be someone like Michael Ruhlman, who writes Thomas Keller's books, and his name appears on the cover alongside Thomas Keller.

[00:46:43]

**Sheri Castle:** Right. I do not know how you bridge that. I don't know how you bridge that.

[00:46:50]

**Rien Fertel:** Well, do you think it's a gender thing? Do you think it's a—?

[00:46:54]

**Sheri Castle:** Well, first of all, they have their own name. When you're a with-er, I call that being a professional with-er, the with name has to have some purpose on that book to augment sales, corroborate things. There's something. Even though I think there's

probably people in the industry that know what I do, I do not have enough clout and name recognition to win the battle of being an acknowledged with-er on the cover.

[00:47:22]

**Rien Fertel:** And you do think it's just name recognition?

[00:47:25]

**Sheri Castle:** I, yes, I believe that that is it. There also is a huge inside baseball issue in New York publishing.

[00:47:33]

**Rien Fertel:** Okay. And so, you think it's geographic, you don't live there—

[00:47:39]

**Sheri Castle:** I am stunned I've gotten as much work as I have as a middle-aged Southern woman. I recently turned in a manuscript for something—I need to be very careful how I say this, I need to stay vague—where they wanted me, but they didn't want me, they wanted some version of a Southern woman that they had that learned up with their notions. And I got back a manuscript where the editor had inserted phrases such as, “Aw, shucks,” “Gee, whiz,” and “innards,” because she didn't think I sounded enough like a Southerner.

[00:48:18]

**Rien Fertel:** So, right. So kind of Paula Deen-ish speech patterns.

[00:48:22]

**Sheri Castle:** Right, right. Exactly, exactly. I think there is still this notion that if you don't live in Manhattan you cannot possibly know how to cook or get groceries. And, “Have you ever been on a plane? And do you need me to send you some shoes?” Remember that job I had when I was seventeen? I'm still getting that some within the publishing world.

[00:48:45]

**Rien Fertel:** Is there any book you would not co-author or ghostwrite?

[00:48:50]

**Sheri Castle:** Oh, absolutely. There is one I'm not ashamed of the work, I'm sorry I worked with that brand entity. I had my reasons for doing it and I wish I had not. And I have absolutely said no to things. I have to live—at the end of the day, I have to live with myself. I have to keep the lights on and I have to live with myself. There's absolutely people I will not work with.

[00:49:16]

**Rien Fertel:** Have you said yes to things that surprised you? Can you do non-Southern books?

[00:49:23]

**Sheri Castle:** Oh, I just did that French cookbook, for example. Oh, yeah. I do all sorts of kinds of cooking. So, see, if anybody should have any notion of my personal work, it tends to be Southern. But if you really look, it's not all Southern. I apply Mediterranean cooking techniques to traditional Southern ingredients, so I'm very much a Southerner and very much not. But yeah, I can write about all sorts of things. I know what I've done—I've written Italian books, I've written, you know, resort books. I've written a book out of Seattle. I've written books for lots of different things, but because they're ghosted or because I was a fixer on it or something, my own agent doesn't know everything I've done.

[00:50:03]

**Rien Fertel:** Oh, because—?

[00:50:03]

**Sheri Castle:** Um-hmm, because of non-disclosures. I'm on my second agent. I started out with one agency, and now I'm with a different agency. Also, I don't go through an agent for anything. I get a lot of desperate calls in the night where I will just go in and do

something. Now, if it's a whole—I probably shouldn't, my agent might hear this. But anyway. Sometimes I just go in and it's a quick in and out, uh-huh.

[00:50:32]

**Rien Fertel:** You mentioned death threats earlier—

[00:50:32]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes.

[00:50:33]

**Rien Fertel:** I'm guessing that's the *Bitter Southerner* piece.

[00:50:35]

**Sheri Castle:** It is.

[00:50:35]

**Rien Fertel:** But is it other things, too?

[00:50:36]

**Sheri Castle:** No, no, no. That, yes. That really did happen. And it scared me, it scared me. If people don't think food matters, piss somebody off. Because the gist of it is, and I need to talk to someone that lives in a very geographically specific place, but the thing about writing about Southern food is, there's so many ways to be Southern, but a lot of home cooks think, if you don't make exactly what their sainted granny made exactly the way she made it, then it's heresy, and they get very angry. So angry that they will threaten to kill you over a cream cheese poundcake, and they're not kidding.

[00:51:24]

**Rien Fertel:** And these were emails that came in?

[00:51:26]

**Sheri Castle:** And some calls and stuff. We actually—I for a while just took down—I just stopped, getting off of media and so forth. We actually had a sheriff park outside my house for a few nights. That man was coming to get me, and he wasn't kidding. He was in great detail how he was going to kill me over putting a block of Philadelphia cream cheese in a poundcake. It was the Philadelphia part that set him off.

[00:51:53]

**Rien Fertel:** So—

[00:51:55]

**Sheri Castle:** That's a brand name, of course, we know.

[00:51:58]

**Rien Fertel:** But why do you think it's about food or is it about Southern pride?

[00:52:06]

**Sheri Castle:** I believe that he found it an affront to his identity. I think it's like, “I'm a Southerner. You are not. This is what we ate and that's Southern food and you didn't and you don't and you are not Southern.” Food is—Southern food is rarely about the food. It's about people's interaction with it, their perception—again, uses and gratifications. And I offended him deeply and he wanted me gone.

[00:52:42]

**Rien Fertel:** Do you want to do—getting back to the cookbooks—or, actually, I want to ask one more question about it. Has that scared you away from doing similar-type recipes, lists with your name on it?

[00:53:02]

**Sheri Castle:** No, no. No. Somebody called that *Bitter Southerner* piece a listicle, and that infuriated me.

[00:53:10]

**Rien Fertel:** I didn't want to call it a listicle. It's not a listicle. Because t's essays and recipes.

[00:53:13]

**Sheri Castle:** Exactly. What it was is Chuck Reese called me one day and he said, "I've got something I want you to do. I want you to give me the five essential Southern recipes." I thought he was kidding. I laughed. I'm like, "You do realize that's the most ludicrous thing anybody's ever asked me to do?" But I took it seriously, and I think that that whole thing is one of the best three things I've done in my career. I stand behind that piece for a lot of different reasons. And because, if one takes the time to read it instead of just looking at the photos and drawing their sidearms, there's a lot of what I deeply believe about Southern food, and that is, there is no way for any piece, seven, seven hundred, seven thousand. I said in there, "What you see as Southern depends on who's stirring the pot." And I mean that. I got to a lot of stuff that—and I, in some ways, wish that piece had gotten more attention. Rather than less. And I should have nominated it for some stuff. And I just, I'm not the kind of person that nominates my own work. I wish somebody else had.

[00:54:18]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. Is there a cookbook that you want to write with your name on it?

[00:54:25]

**Sheri Castle:** There is. There is. And I'm not sure anybody will ever buy it.

[00:54:32]

**Rien Fertel:** Are you willing or able to talk about why?

[00:54:35]

**Sheri Castle:** Again, it's name recognition. It's the complete shifting sands in publishing. It is harder and harder. Competence matters little. It's fame over form. Kim Kardashian will

get a hundred cookbook contracts before I get another one. It's very hard for talent, skill, competence, and all that to be enough of a swaying factor to get a cookbook contract.

[00:55:10]

**Rien Fertel:** Do you think you'll ever—you have a big name. James Beard Award-winning chefs call you up when their kitchen's on fire. What would it take for you to get that name?

[00:55:23]

**Sheri Castle:** I don't know. It's interesting you're asking me this now, because I've done a lot of deep and hurtful soul-searching in the last three months about what is to become of me. What am I gonna do. To mix really bad metaphors, did I miss the train? Or do I not know how to jump off a speeding train? I don't know. I don't know. And it may be that I'm as famous as I'm ever going to get, which isn't all that famous.

[00:55:53]

**Rien Fertel:** But that's okay, right?

[00:55:57]

**Sheri Castle:** Yes and no. It is hard to have a book that you have done win a Beard Award when you will—me, Sheri Castle, will never, ever, ever be invited to sit at that table.

[00:56:10]

**Rien Fertel:** That Beard table, right, right.

[00:56:13]

**Sheri Castle:** Yeah. I don't get invited to the Southern Mafia luncheon, I don't get invited to the after-parties at big events and stuff like that. They want me to solve their problems, but they don't want me as part of it. It's a very tangled thing that I don't know what to make of it. Maybe I should write a book about it.

[00:56:37]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. I'd love to read that book. One of the general themes in the restaurant world and cooking world, over the past years, of course, the #MeToo movement, trying to find some sort of gender equity in the publishing world, in the restaurant world, in the kitchen world, while at the same time punishing people who have done some really bad things. Do you think the publishing world has the same problem that the celebrity chef kitchen world, or that the kitchen world at large has?

[00:57:15]

**Sheri Castle:** It may. It probably does. Let me go to say is, given how pervasive that is in all of humanity, I can't imagine that it doesn't. But except for a very short period of time that I was on staff with a magazine, I have always worked from home, and I have probably been not a daily observer of that. I know things anecdotally, things that I know some really awful things have been said to me, but because I have worked from home or behind the scenes, I'm not witnessing it in the same way that it's probably those who have to show up and work in that environment, nine to five.

[00:57:54]

**Rien Fertel:** Right. Do you think you—well, we can talk about pay equity, right? Do you think you get—

[00:58:00]

**Sheri Castle:** Oh, no, I don't get paid. I do not get paid a fraction of what most people in this business do because I've never known what my work was worth and I've never known how to advocate for it. I don't know if that is a personal thing, shortcoming? Is it my age? Is it because I'm Southern and I still think my baseline ought to be to be nice? I don't know what all that is. But sometimes I will get wind of what people get paid for stuff and it infuriates me.

[00:58:33]

**Rien Fertel:** So, when you help a book win a James Beard Award, when you write that book, is your agent allowed—when your agent is pitching your services, is your agent allowed to say that?

[00:58:50]

**Sheri Castle:** There are a few things, yes.

[00:58:52]

**Rien Fertel:** To make your price rise?

[00:58:53]

**Sheri Castle:** We're trying that a little bit. We're trying that. But see, I signed really detailed non-disclosures. Plus, there's just a kind of a—you know in that movie, Fight Club, the first rule of Fight Club is you don't talk about Fight Club? The first rule of ghosting is, you don't talk about it. I mean, I have had clients that the repercussions, both contractually and in our community, if I had said to these people, I did not tell my then-husband and daughter who it was, lest they accidentally let it slip. Because they could have come for my child, my car, and my kidney. And, so, no. My agent cannot always use my past work as a tool of leverage. And again, I'm not famous. Fame will get you paid more than anything else, because too much of the world does not have the capacity to discern the difference between famous and good. And I'm getting a little bit of that now, even with editors. There are editors in both books and magazines that are in their late twenties, and they think, “Wow, she's about my mom's age. My mom doesn't know diddly shit. I can't hire her how to do this, because my mom wouldn't know how to do this, and if she did, I don't want to work with my mom.” I think my personal problem may be ageism more than sexism. We'll see.

[01:00:22]

**Rien Fertel:** So you started your career in your thirties. Do you think if you started in your twenties, it would look different?

[01:00:29]

**Sheri Castle:** I think is that my problem was, even though I said I didn't know what I was doing, I didn't have any grand plan and all that, I have never made a grand plan. I have somehow had work come to me rather than me pursue it, and for a long time, I just wanted to work and I was not careful about the terms and parameters of that.

[01:00:53]

**Rien Fertel:** I think just one more question. When you do recipe development, when you're writing, do you work at home or do you have an off-site?

[01:01:03]

**Sheri Castle:** No. I work at home, and I have worked on books for restaurants where I made them find me a house, find me the employee break room, rent me an apartment or something. You cannot write recipes for home cooks on professional equipment.

[01:01:14]

**Rien Fertel:** Okay. So, that was my next question, because throughout this conversation, I've been trying to envision what your kitchen looks like.

[01:01:22]

**Sheri Castle:** I have a very modest kitchen.

[01:01:23]

**Rien Fertel:** Right. So this one time I'm like, "Oh, it's just very simple, she probably has, like, the most kind of remedial instruments in there, or cooking utensils." Other times, I'm like, "Wow, she must have everything."

[01:01:36]

**Sheri Castle:** You know, I would say that I probably have more cooking equipment than some people. Bu not really, necessarily. And I had, for a variety of reasons, had to downsize majorly about four years ago. And I had a very nice, not magazine-quality, but a very

spacious kitchen with lots of storage space, and now I'm in a very tiny kitchen. But the truth of the matter is, if you can't cook on a Bunsen burner in the middle of a parking lot with no refrigeration, you can't cook in the most palatial kitchen. At some point, you can either cook or you can't. And despite all the work I've done from appliance companies that wanted me to say differently, at the end of the day, it is not the equipment. It's the person holding it. And so, my readers aren't working in those kitchens, either.

[01:02:27]

**Rien Fertel:** You told me right before we started that you are, today, going on your first vacation in five years.

[01:02:33]

**Sheri Castle:** Yep.

[01:02:33]

**Rien Fertel:** How do you plan on relaxing? Are you going to read? Are you going to not read? What are you going to do?

[01:02:37]

**Sheri Castle:** I'm going to, I have some fiction. I have some books I've accumulated that I've wanted to read, and I'm hoping I can stop my racing mind long enough to actually read a book for pleasure. And then, right on the heels of that—this is kind of the preamble. I applied to and got a writing residency at an arts center that I start on June 19.

[01:02:58]

**Rien Fertel:** Excellent.

[01:02:58]

**Sheri Castle:** And it is, I feel like a kid that can go in a store and pick one free thing, and my God, what if I choose the wrong thing? I am almost overwhelmed by the possibility of what I can do for fifteen days where I can write for me instead of somebody else.

[01:03:17]

**Rien Fertel:** Do you have a sense of what you want to do?

[01:03:19]

**Sheri Castle:** Um-hmm.

[01:03:19]

**Rien Fertel:** [Laughter] Do you want to talk it out? Or do you want to—

[01:03:20]

**Sheri Castle:** Yeah, I probably should have, like, several therapists on speed dial as I drive to Georgia where this is. I don't know.

[01:03:28]

**Rien Fertel:** Yeah. I don't think there's a wrong way to go. There can't be.

[01:03:29]

**Sheri Castle:** I don't think that there is. I don't think that there is, either. It might be really nice to just sit and think, what do I think about some things? Instead of, what does this piece have to be about or what do I think some client would be? To just, like, what do I think about that? And write some of it down.

[01:03:49]

**Rien Fertel:** Well, good. I'm happy for you.

[01:03:50]

**Sheri Castle:** Thank you. Thank you.

[01:03:5]

**Rien Fertel:** Well, I think this was a wonderful conversation.

[01:03:54]

**Sheri Castle:** It was. I appreciate this so much. I am truly stunned and humbled and grateful for this. Thank you.

**[End of interview]**