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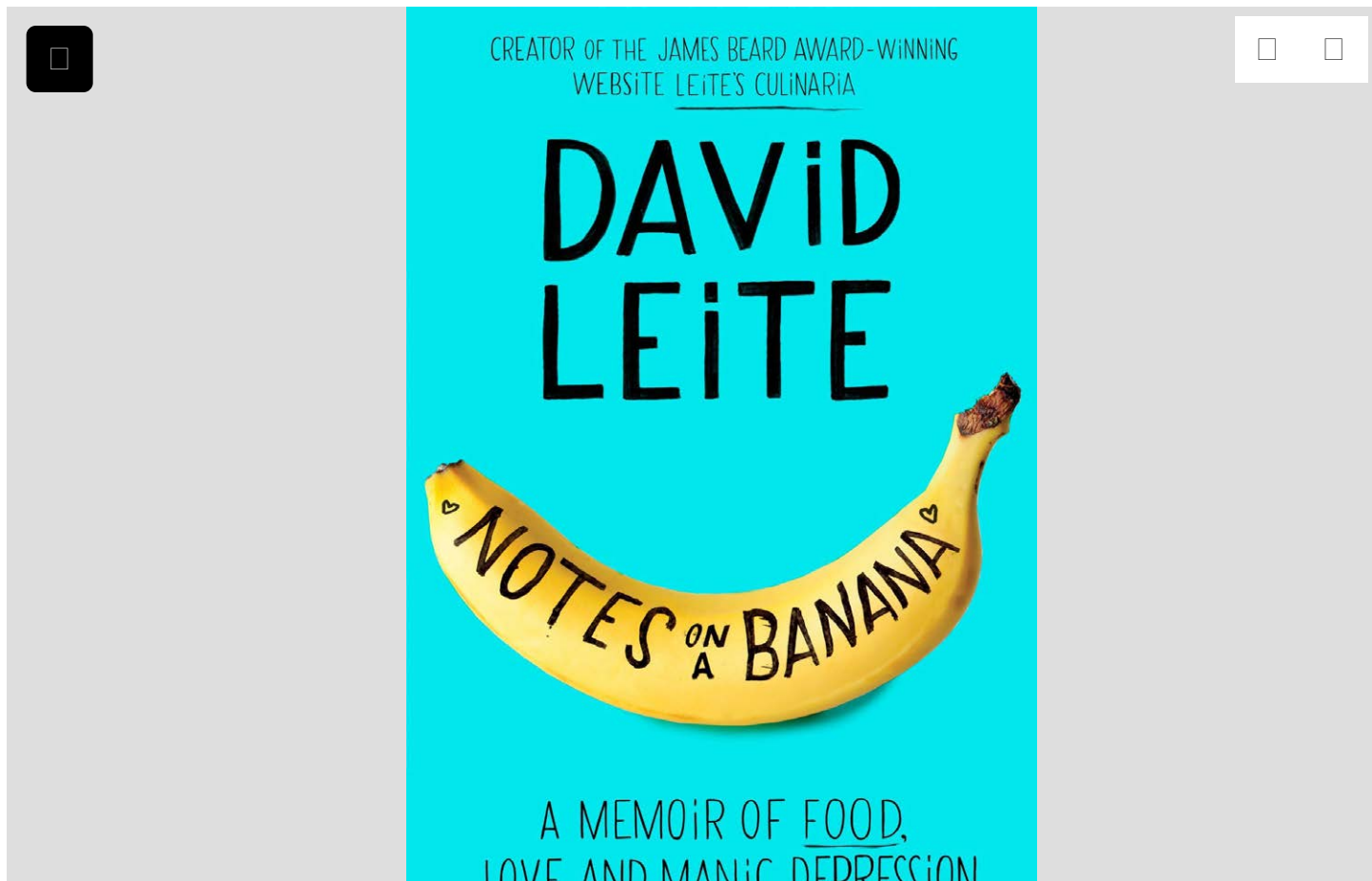
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Author David Leite recounts a life of love, food and madness before Tulsa visit

David Leite's new book covers how food gave him a manner of peace

By James D. Watts Jr. Tulsa World Sep 3, 2017 Updated Sep 3, 2017 0



Book event

Chapters: A Casual Evening of Books, Bites and Bards

When: 6:30 p.m. Sept. 7

Where: Hardesty Regional Library, 8316 E. 93rd St.

Cost: \$50 at the door, by calling 918-549-7494



David Leite never believed there was such a thing as a “Proustian moment” — when something as simple as the taste of a particular food triggers a flood of long-forgotten memories.

Until it happened to him.

“My partner, Alan, had decided he was going to make a cake,” Leite said. “We’re pretty certain it was a pineapple upside-down cake, and in the course of it, he asked if I wanted to lick the bowl. The smell and the taste of that batter suddenly brought back a memory, a very vivid memory of that same aroma and flavor.”

The memory was so strong that Leite immediately called his mother to ask if she had ever baked such a cake.

“She said no, she had never done that,” Leite recalled. “I asked her if my godmother had, and again, she said no. But then my mother said, ‘Now, your grandmother used to bake that kind of cake all the time.’

“Suddenly, all these memories of my grandmother came flooding back,” he said. “Things I had forgotten started to re-emerge when I started cooking myself. And it was a year later I wrote my first article on food that started it all.”

What that “Proustian moment” engendered is a career as a food writer, cookbook author and web publisher that has earned Leite two James Beard Awards for his website, Leite’s Culinaria (leitesculinaria.com), as well as the International Association of Culinary Professionals’ First Book Julia Child Award for his

cookbook “The New Portuguese Table.”

Leite has recently published his second book, “Notes on a Banana: A Memoir of Food, Love and Manic Depression” (Dey Street, \$26.99). The book chronicles Leite’s life growing up in a close-knit if somewhat combative family of Portuguese descent living in Fall River, Massachusetts, his struggles with a number of personal demons and how food — learning about it, cooking it, enjoying it — helped him to find some manner of peace.

Leite will come to Tulsa to be part of “Chapters: A Casual Evening of Books, Bites and Bards,” a fundraising event for the Tulsa City-County Library’s Ruth G. Hardman Adult Literacy Program.

Leite will be joined by Tulsa-area authors Jennifer Latham (“Scarlett Undercover,” “Dreamland Burning”) and Julia Thomas (“The English Boys,” “Penhale Wood”), who will discuss and sign copies of their books, while patrons enjoy food prepared by dozens of local restaurants.

“Banana” was the nickname Leite’s mother gave him as a youngster, when he and seven other members of his extended family were living in apartments in a neighborhood called Mechanicsville.

“Notes on a Banana” chronicles Leite’s often painful, sometimes comic journey to understand, then accept, all the many aspects of himself.

“I had no real idea where all these feelings came from,” Leite said. “The panic attacks, the anxiety, the anger, the depression — I didn’t know what they were attached to. Writing this book was a systematic process of understanding and accepting the three major areas of life: my heritage, my sexuality and my mental illness.”

For example, as a youngster, Leite writes that “I wanted to be blond and blue-eyed and have a last name like Stevens or Nelson.”

“I didn’t want to have anything to do with Portuguese food,” Leite said. “After a while, my mom gave up, and I started eating every sort of terrible American food I could get my hands on — Pop Tarts and Swanson frozen dinners and Count Chocula cereal — and I was happy beyond belief.”

Leite remembers watching Julia Child’s “The French Chef” on TV as a way to avoid going outside.

“My mother mistook my interest in the show as an interest in cooking and bought a Betty Crocker children’s cookbook,” he said. “But my real interest in food came later, when I had that moment with the cake batter. That made me want to learn to bake, which is still something I love to do.

“But it was when my maternal grandmother died, when I was about 32, and I noticed that certain dishes disappeared from our table,” Leite said. “A part of her, and of our family, had disappeared forever. That led to my interest in Portuguese cuisine because I would ask my mother about recipes, and she started telling stories of our family.”

Leite would ultimately make a trip to the Azores, the cluster of islands in the Atlantic that are a Portuguese territory, to trace his family history.

“While I was there, I had this epiphany, about how I had come full circle,” he said. “I realized the incredible courage it took to come from this tiny island and start all over again with nothing in a new country — leaving behind a middle-class life for one of poverty. I suddenly had this incredible sense of being connected to this land, and now I embrace my Portuguese heritage to the

point that I now have dual citizenship.”

Spaghetti alla Carbonara

This knock-it-out-of-the park spaghetti alla carbonara recipe calls for extra egg yolk, which lends an extra silken richness and lusciousness to the dish. If you want a traditional version, use 4 whole eggs. I’ve also seen Italian cooks use an extra large egg yolk per person, which is super luxurious.

Also, a lot of readers have asked whether they can use freshly made pasta. You can, but I find that using a premium dried pasta made from durum or semolina wheat really helps the sauce to cling.

- Raw Egg Reminder

A gentle reminder that this spaghetti alla carbonara recipe contains raw egg. Please be aware of this if you’re making the recipe for anyone for whom that’s a potential food safety no-no, including the very young, the very old, the very pregnant, and the very compromised in terms of immunity. All the rest of you, go ahead and sit down to this outrageously easy and traditional Italian carbonara recipe with gusto.





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INGREDIENTS

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

6 ounces thickly sliced pancetta, cut into 1/4-inch pieces

2 tablespoons kosher salt

1 pound spaghetti

3 large eggs plus 1 large egg yolk, well beaten

3/4 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, combined with 1/4 cup grated pecorino Romano

Freshly ground black pepper

1. Grab your largest skillet and place it over medium heat. Pour the olive oil into the skillet and wait until the oil ripples. Toss in the pancetta and cook, stirring often, until crisp. Slide the skillet off the heat and just let it sit on the stove for a few minutes.

2. Meanwhile, bring 6 quarts of water to a boil in a large pot. Toss in the salt and the spaghetti and boil, stirring to keep the strands from sticking to one another, until al dente. Carefully scoop out

3/4 cup of the pasta cooking water and reserve it. Then drain the spaghetti in a colander, shaking it to release any excess liquid.

3. Working quickly, dump the hot drained spaghetti into the skillet with the pancetta and place over very low heat.

Immediately add the beaten eggs and half the cheese and toss well. Add just enough of the reserved pasta water to make the mixture lusciously creamy. (You'll want to add the pasta water incrementally, tossing all the while you're dribbling in the water, while everything magically coalesces into a velvety sauce that cloaks each strand.) Sprinkle generously with pepper and serve at once. Pass the remaining cheese at the table.

Recipe courtesy Leite's Culinaria



Scene Writer James D. Watts Jr.

James writes primarily about the visual, performing and literary arts. Phone: 918-581-8478



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