

# Glossy

May 2010



## Natural instincts

Meet the women  
behind 'Texas Huntress'

## By Jardine Libaire

SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN STATESMAN

**H**ow does a self-proclaimed “punk rock debutante from Houston,” an animal lover and one-time gun control advocate land in the African brush tracking a wildebeest with a rifle?

Meet Ashley Chiles, founder of the “The Texas Huntress,” a Web and DVD project. Chiles, niece of Bond Girl and “Dallas” actress Lois Chiles, got her bachelor’s degree in film at the University of Texas, assisted director Richard Linklater, and has worked on various films, documentaries and multimedia projects.

Her current project is a personal one, born from questions Chiles has about sustainable living, meat consumption and the identity of the modern woman. “I don’t presume to have all the answers,” she says of Texas Huntress, “but I’m asking lots of questions.” Her work was inspired by Michael Pollan’s 2006 book “The Omnivore’s Dilemma,” which followed food from its origin to the plate, analyzing the costs and benefits — physical, financial and moral — along the way.

The Texas Huntress is a trinity of native Texas women, Chiles and friends Amy Esacove and Patrice Shackelford, who travel the world, learning various forms of hunting (from shotgun to rifle to bow, tracking to stalking) and participating in feasts cooked by great and progressive chefs, often from the regions where they’re hunting. Their agenda has included trips to West Texas ranches, the grasslands of Argentina and places in between. The women write about the experience on their Facebook page, and their exploits are the subject of a 12-episode documentary series shot by cinematographer Matt Luem.

Chiles sees herself as part activist, part journalist. “I always want a soapbox to stand on,” she says. “But basically, I want to take myself and everyone else on a beautiful adventure to explore how we eat and live.”

The heart of this adventure is what Chiles refers to as “meeting the meat.” The problem of factory-abused animals is a prevalent issue in the mainstream press these days, but many of us have an easier time

eating meat if we separate the food from the idea of the living animal. Hunting allows for no such distance. Esacove has spent years of her life as a vegetarian, but she looks at Texas Huntress as an opportunity to grapple with issues of meat consumption, and she believes that eating meat is not a "violent" act if done in accordance with and with respect for nature.

"We're not trophy hunting," says Shackelford. Since the Texas Huntress experiment began, she's been particularly affected by the need to use a whole animal instead of wasting pieces. "Going to the grocery store, we're spoiled," says Shackelford. "If we sat out in a blind in the rain for three days hunting a hog, we'd use every little part of that animal."

While the main objective for The Texas Huntress is quite serious, the project itself is at times funny, often glamorous and purposefully unsettling. This combustible set of factors originates in a contradictory archetype of the Texas woman herself, who manages to be brave, swaggering and demure at the same time, getting her hands dirty doing hard work while wearing scarlet lipstick and black stilettos, roping a calf and baking a cake simultaneously.

Chiles tapped Luem for the project because of his experience with high-end commercial production and honest documentary work. She wants to avoid the reality-show formula. Luem, in turn, respects how Chiles pulls together a dynamic consortium of characters — from hunting guides to chefs to vintners

to film editors to consultants.

The first episode showcases a number of these personalities while following the Texas huntresses through the Cordoniz Ranch in South Texas, hunting wild boar. "My dad grew up not far from there," says Chiles, "and I wanted to start somewhere close to my heart." Lupe Flores is their guide who directs them through freezing rain and cactus thickets. Once they succeed in shooting a hog, the women must learn to skin the feral animal. Then renowned Houston chefs Jonathan Jones (Beaver's Ice House) and Bryan Caswell (Reef and Stella Sola — he was a 2009 Food & Wine Best New Chef and is a 2010 James Beard Award finalist) conspire on a menu that includes a Butternut and Chorizo Soup, Crispy Hog Bits on Spinach with Bosque Blue Cheese, and Carnitas Pork 'n' Beans with Hog Butt Confit. The feast is enjoyed by cast and crew, and part of the dinner is spent discussing the next hunt, in the wine country of Napa Valley.

Chiles picks the chefs and locations for each episode based on introductions and recommendations from an ever-growing network of sustainable-food activists and friends. For the first episode, though, Chiles demanded a basic role switch: "I wanted men in the kitchen and the women out hunting."

Other consultants to Texas Huntress include Torrey Oates, associate producer and "culinary guru," founder of the New England Epicurean Society, and Tai Power Seeff, a Los Angeles-based photographer who has been documenting the project in stills.

So that she doesn't lose her way, Chiles looks to Peter Beard and Karen Blixen as exemplars of artists with strong points of view and visual styles. Beard's Africa-based journals and collages are wild and evocative compounds of dried leaves, blood, fashion photographs, torn newspaper pages and drawings by African artists. Chiles is inspired by Beard's will "to live the travel, adventures and stories which inform his art." Blixen, who wrote "Out of Africa" based on her own life, is a heroine to Chiles for being a storyteller as well as "a

Continued on next page

woman of great courage, strength and independence.”

The process of seeking backers for a project like this, especially in order to get it onto TV, is notorious for compromises. So Chiles is going a route that has become popular lately, especially for creators who want to maintain control of their material: an online series. The burgeoning realm of Web TV series has spawned cult hits as well as new ways for people to relate to shows. Luem thinks “Texas Huntress” is perfect for this venue, having so many elements — chef personalities, recipes, travel tips — that can be components of an interactive experience. He says people can access the show in different ways, watching a two-minute clip of an episode on the website, becoming a fan on the Facebook page, following a link to a vineyard that made the wine featured in a “Texas Huntress” feast. Most importantly, though, Luem believes it’s an essential way to establish and protect “an audience, a point of view and a visual style,” all of which can be crushed by a network.

The project faces other challenges as well; for example, despite many preliminary safety meetings for cast and crew, Luem found shooting film in a dove tank “dicey,” surrounded

as he was by gunfire and constantly having to duck.

And then there is the fact that this project explores notions of gun rights and gun control, investigates the real efficacy and dynamics of sustainable hunting and living and occasionally exposes inhumane traditions in hunting. There are those out there, too, who find that the project's combining of killing animals with fashion and glamour unpalatable. Chiles welcomes any kind of conversation the show stirs up, even if or especially if it's a contentious one. As long as the debaters know how to spar graciously, as the best Texas women over time have proved can be done.

# Awaken your inner explorer

Even after a decade of living in Austin — or more likely, because of it — I'm still completely fascinated with Texas women. From Ann Richards to Laura Bush, from Selena to Mary Kay Ash, their legend, style and personality loom large.

So I was intrigued about the latest project from 2008 Glossy 8 Style Maker Ashley Chiles. The Houston native and two Texas friends have been traveling the globe for a project they call the Texas Huntress. On their trips, which they've filmed for a Web/DVD series, they team up with local experts to hunt and cook; along the way, they explore what

it means to eat locally and respectfully as well as confront gender and environmental issues. It's compelling and controversial — the perfect topic for author and freelance writer Jardine Libraire.

One thing we know for sure: Austin loves its dogs. Statesman writer Helen Anders explored services and treats for our favorite four-leggers (sorry, cats) who dwell downtown. Who needs a backyard when you have a private dog park in the sky (the Austonian), Yippy Hours (the W) and personal trainers (the Four Seasons Residences)?

Elsewhere in this issue, you'll find tips on how to



Tal Power Seft

Patrice Shackelford, left, Ashley Chiles and Amy Esacove — the women behind the Texas Huntress — enjoy the efforts of their hunt at a dinner prepared by acclaimed chefs Jonathan Jones and Bryan Caswell.

make the most of your spring. Amy Gabriel would tell you to add some aqua to your life. Marques Harper's tip: Moisturize! And Becca Hensley's piece on the bicycles of Amsterdam

will inspire you to hop on your own two-wheeler. And then she'd tell you to cool off with a French 75 — either with gin or cognac, it's up to you!

— Kathy Blackwell

## Glossy

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