

Home (Cooking) for the Holidays

Provo's Kelsey Nixon spreads holiday cheer with original recipes and a new Food Network show

by ashley dickson ▲ photography by instudio by kenneth linge

For a 24-year-old, Kelsey Nixon's resume reads like a recipe for success — she's earned culinary arts degrees and a bachelor's in journalism, she's worked for Martha Stewart Living, she develops recipes for Utah-based Zupas, and she's taught her cooking techniques to millions of Food Network viewers. But it wasn't until recently that Kelsey was asked to contribute to her family's holiday feast.

"I've just barely earned the privilege to start cooking for the family," she says. "I'm surrounded by fabulous cooks — it's intimidating!"

But she has those fabulous cooks to thank for her passion for food — the passion that took her from being a BYU student and Cougarette who tested recipes on roommates to becoming the fan-voted favorite contestant on "The Next Food Network Star."

Here is a portion of our conversation about chocolate and fish, vintage cookbooks, and the perks of being from Utah.

UV: What are the holidays like in a food-centered family?

KELSEY: We don't feast just on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Leading up to the holidays there are cookie exchanges, dinner parties, Christmas recipe exchanges. In my family we'll pick a theme for Christmas dinner. One year it was Mexican food, one year just finger foods, one year we made all fresh pastas like homemade tortellini and ravioli and lasagna. One of the things we all look forward to is the food. Even my grandpa gets involved — he makes a baked salmon dish and pesto poppers. We have a really good time.

UV: What role does food play at this time of year?

KELSEY: Every holiday memory I hold near and dear involves food somehow. Whether it's the Fourth of July or Thanksgiving, food is a

central theme — it brings people together. It doesn't matter how you were raised or where you come from. It's something you can share with someone you may have nothing in common with or with the people you love most. When you bring something you've made to a holiday party, you're bringing part of yourself.

UV: How did your family's love for food help mold your career path?

KELSEY: Food was always the thing I looked forward to as a kid. Family dinner was very important to my mom. I can count on my hands the number of times she didn't cook a homemade meal. My mom is also a great entertainer. She'll buy dishes over anything else — she probably has 15 different sets of dishes. She'll create this huge experience where everyone has a place card and a menu. It may stress some people out, but for us it's so much fun.

UV: So when you came to BYU, you probably weren't making Ramen and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

KELSEY: I think my passion came when I went to college and had to learn to cook on my own. I had fun learning. I decided to make a new recipe every day. The neighbors really benefited from that!

UV: What did you study?

KELSEY: I came to BYU knowing I wanted to apply to the broadcast program. After a semester I realized that lifestyle wasn't what I wanted. Call me Utah Valley, but I really want to have a family and do the kid thing and throw the big birthday parties. I thought, maybe there's something in lifestyle television. I found it when I did my first internship at Martha Stewart Living in New York. They film once a year for three