



MY FRENCH COUNTRY HOME

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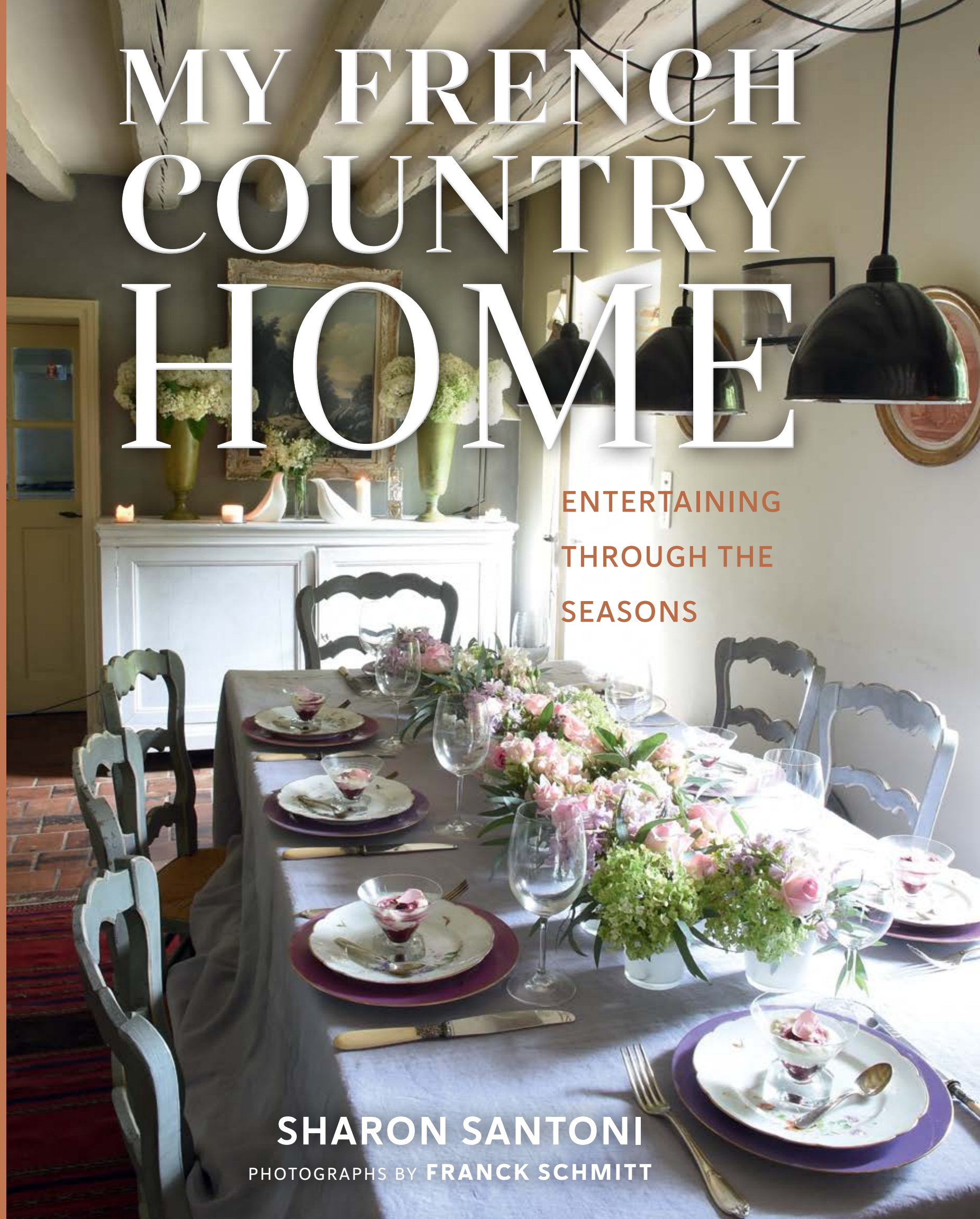


MY FRENCH COUNTRY HOME

ENTERTAINING
THROUGH THE
SEASONS

SHARON SANTONI

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANCK SCHMITT



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FIRESIDE COOKING

Before I came to France, I had never eaten a meal cooked over a fire before. (As a marshmallow grilled on a stick around a campfire simply doesn't count.) I mean a real meal, prepared with care and savored with friends.

There are restaurants in this part of France that specialize in cooking their meats over an open fire. Tender meat is grilled to perfection in front of attentive clients; at home you need a sure hand to do the same.

While at first this may seem ambitious, it really is part of an age-old tradition. The principle of cooking over a fire indoors is not that much different from a barbeque outdoors, but you need the right equipment. Long-handled frying pans, simple open grills or deeper pots are all useful, but the most important item is the support that allows you to raise or lower the food above the fire. You are looking to achieve constant, measured heat rather than carbonizing flames!

We have two open fireplaces in our house, and we cook in either of them, depending on the occasion. The smaller fireplace in the living room may be used to prepare a sausage, cut to share as an appetizer, while the one in the dining room, which is bigger and easier to access, is often used for family meals, with everyone keeping an eye on the food while the table is laid and the rest of the meal prepared.

Lighting a fire always warms up the atmosphere, even if the house is heated. There is a coziness about sitting in front of a fire that nothing else can match. When the flames are also used to prepare the meal, then the feel-good element is only amplified.



Summer

A visitor traveling through France during the warmest months quickly understands the importance of the traditionally long French summer break. In small provincial towns, entire streets of stores go quiet for several weeks during the month of August while the owners close up shop to take a rest and enjoy some important family time. Most French people are entitled to five weeks of vacation during the year, and they like to use a large part of their allowance during the summer—visiting family, driving down south, or heading into the mountains, as *il faut changer d'air*, (yes, everyone needs a “change of scenery!”).

As there are so many beautiful regions to choose from, many people opt to stay in France for the holidays with the most popular destinations being in the south for the warmth, but also the mountains for hiking, or the center of France, where the weather is reliable and it is less crowded.

Even in Paris the change of mood is tangible: the traffic is lighter, the parking is free and there is a festive mood in the air as café terraces overflow with unhurried clients happy to make a coffee last for an hour and take their time reading the newspaper or eating a light lunch in the sunshine.



MUSHROOM BAKE

SERVES 6 TO 8

For this recipe I use a filo or flaky pastry bought from my local baker.

- 1 puff pastry, or use filo dough
- 1 ounce (400g) mushrooms
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 shallot, chopped
- Olive oil
- Generous 1/2 cup (4 fl oz, or 15cl) cream
- Salt and pepper
- 1 egg beaten with 1 tablespoon water

Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C).

Roll out the pastry into a square approximately 12 inches (30cm) wide, and place on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. If you want to plait the top of the pastry bake, then draw two light lines on the pastry so that it is visually divided into three equal parts. Using a knife, cut diagonal slits into the two outer thirds of the pastry. This is to form the strips that you will fold to the top and plait together later on.

Clean and slice the mushrooms. Crush the garlic and cook gently in a pan with the shallot and a little olive oil. Add the sliced mushrooms and cook over medium heat until the mushrooms smell divine and any liquid has evaporated. Add the cream, salt and pepper to taste, and cook lightly until the cream has evaporated a little.

Spoon the mushroom mix onto the center third part of the pastry, and bring the strips over, alternating from one side then from the other to form the pastry plait over the mushrooms. Seal the ends of the pastry using a little milk to help the pastry stick together, and coat the entire plait with the beaten egg wash.

Pop it into the oven and bake for around 25 minutes, until golden brown. Serve warm as a snack or to accompany a meat.





Our guest cottage is given a big spring clean, making it ready to welcome friends and family who arrive for a day or two, or more, then settle in to make the little house their own.