War & (Chick)peas

Published June 2011, The New York Review of Ideas,
An NYU Graduate Journalism Website
By Natalia Angulo

Profile: *Annia Ciezadlo – Covering Conflict Dish by Dish*

In 2008 the war in Beirut had been going strong for two years. The Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon had ended in 2000, but Hezbollah was permitted to remain armed for "national security." When the U.S. pressured Hassan Nasrallah's government to disarm Hezbollah, skirmishes between Sunnis and Shiites broke out.

One day that May, Annia Ciezadlo was preparing a pasta lunch for three of her friends when a chorus of aggressive gunfire came from the Beirut streets below. Although they weren't under attack, there was a danger that a stray shot might find its way inside the apartment. All four instinctively leapt away from the windows and wedged themselves into the apartment's cramped hallway. One continued typing up a story; the other two called other reporters to get details on the fighting. After a few minutes of listening for the gunfire to die down, Annia realized that her water must have reached a boil, and the pasta was at risk of being overcooked. While the others watched stunned, she crawled back to the kitchenette and dumped the pasta in the colander to strain.

"Deb and Ben and Mohamad looked up at me, appalled," says Ciezadlo. For her, cooking is a way to reinforce, or at least feign, normalcy.

Ciezadlo is a war correspondent who doesn't (directly) write about war—a sentiment echoed by The New York Times, which praises her memoir, *Days of Honey*, as "among the least political, and most intimate and valuable, to have come out of the Iraq war."

Day of Honey tells the story of Ciezadlo's six years covering the Middle East as a freelance foreign reporter. She arrived after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and left in at the end of 2008 when her husband, Mohamad Bazzi (then working for Newsday) was transferred back to New York. Her work has appeared in The Christian Science Monitor, The New Republic, The Nation, The Washington Post, and The New York Times.

But how does a journalist report a war without focusing on the combat? She centers her stories on culture and civil society, but most importantly Ciezadlo has discovered that food and quotidian objects are the best metaphors for talking to people of different backgrounds.

In "Eau No.," she writes about 'Hezbollah' brand perfume she finds in a local store. The product sold for both cosmetic and patriotic reasons. And in "Once forbidden, graffiti flowers in Baghdad," she follows a man known as 'the Virgil of Baghdad,' who takes her on a tour of the graffiti-painted walls in the city as he decodes their political messages.

Britt Peterson, Ciezadlo's editor at Foreign Policy magazine, believes that she has a knack for picking out the peculiar elements of what makes living in conflict zones so unique. This is why she's able to produce stories attuned to people's every day lives that readers can relate to.

Frank Foer, a contributing editor at The New Republic, says what distinguishes Ciezadlo from other foreign reporters is her "exquisite taste for the telling detail—not just describing the smell of a parking lot crammed with refugees, but finding that parking lot in the first place."

For example, there had been a startling increase in deaths at security checkpoints across Iraq and nobody had tried to figure out why. Ciezadlo hopped in a cab and tested out how checkpoints really worked for "What Iraq's Checkpoints Are Like," the story she wrote about them. She discovered that civilians were as much to blame as soldiers; Iraqi drivers were used to rules they had to follow under Saddam Hussein, and the new regime hadn't explained the new requirements.

In *Day of Honey* she explains that, "Most civilians experience war not as the fighters and victims that parade across the television screens, but as tired housewives peeling potatoes and wondering, all the while, at the stupidity of it." Her analysis caused the military to rethink the checkpoint set up—and helped clarify for civilians some of the ("stupid") new rule changes.

She often uses cuisine to explain her experience overseas because food is a language understood by all people. Food provides perfect metaphors for war: buildings are sandwiched, people are sardined. As Israeli bombs menaced (or pancaked) Lebanon, Ciezadlo explains that, "all of Beirut answered the call, preparing for war with an ancient Lebanese tradition: [grocery] shopping."

On a crisp Saturday morning in mid-March, I meet Ciezadlo at the farmers' market at Union Square. The market is full of interaction: kids race on scooters, shoppers weave their way through stands, producers tempt customers with fresh samples of jams, wine, fruits and bread. Outdoors markets are the backdrop for many of the pivotal moments in Annia's life. Growing up, she and her mother lived a nomadic life, uprooting themselves every couple of months in sync with her mother's shifting jobs. And in the Middle East, markets were where she learned about and befriended the locals.

She fondly recalls trips with her mother to farmers' markets as when she learned to eat: "The market was where my mother taught me to eat what was in season instead of the hard bright strawberries I always begged for at the grocery store."

War & (Chick)peas

Published June 2011, The New York Review of Ideas,
An NYU Graduate Journalism Website
By Natalia Angulo

Annia was born on November 10, 1970 in Chicago, Illinois. She describes herself as a Midwesterner with mixed roots—she's Greek and Polish. While she hardly had a permanent address (she lived in some 20 different cities before she was 18), that doesn't matter. For her, home is where the food is.

One time while she and her mother lived in Arizona, Ciezadlo invited a school friend over for supper. She had been reluctant to show their one-bedroom railroad apartment to anyone, but her friend left marveling at the Suleiman's Pilaf (lamb stew served with rice and yogurt) her mother prepared. Ciezadlo recalls her friend asking in awe if they ate home-cooked meals every night. It was then she realized home is something you make, not an address.

Now 40 and living in the West Village with her husband, she constantly feels the itch to visit new places. The couple, both working war correspondents when they wed, honeymooned in Baghdad. Bazzi believes moving around so much as a child both sparked Ciezadlo's wanderlust, and the curiosity she applies to stories.

At a flower stand in the back of the Farmers' Market, she points out the different types of blossoms for sale and shares that she kept rereading Gabriel Garcia Marquez' memoir, *Living to Tell the Tale*, for insight on writing *Day of Honey*—and travel ideas (she hopes her next vacation is to the beaches of Cartagena, Colombia). Of her favorite pastimes, reading history books tops the list, followed obviously by cooking.

Walking around the stands, heaped with tiny potatoes, unpolished cumquats, and fresh cuts of meat, she keeps one eye looking out for green garlic (her current go-to ingredient) and the other on the crowd. "People-watching is the best free activity in New York," she offers, quickening her pace when she spots a stand with unusual greens.

The ordinary people who seem to blend in the masses have sort of become Ciezadlo's news beat. After a stint waitressing, at the age of 28 she enrolled into graduate school at New York University for journalism. She credits waiting tables with teaching her to read people—this is evident in her reporting.

Bill Serrin, a news-writing professor at NYU, remembers Annia as having a keen interest in local and civil affairs. "She knew exactly what she wanted to do. She wanted to write about regular people because that's how she relates to the world, as a regular person."

Her first story from Baghdad, which was published in The Houston Chronicle, is about a little girl whose birthday was forgotten and schooling was postponed because of bombings. She lamented over a dribble-y chicken molé tamale on a park bench in Union Square that stories like this are the type very few editors will print.

"While women reporters have a tremendous competitive advantage in warzones getting people to talk to you," she continues, scrambling for a napkin (or five), "still fewer editors will bite at stories *about* women and real people living in warzones because they just aren't interested."

But still she found a way to get these stories out. Foer says what made Annia's stories work for even the sometimes-hesitant editor was that, "She brought a real depth of cultural understanding to her subject. Annia understood how to speak to her sources in a way that inspired them toward frankness."

We later meet at the Half King, the haven of the Sebastian Junger literary-types, where she has a book reading to promote *Day of Honey*. Some 40 guests sit on leather sofas and wooden chairs nibbling on shepherd's pies and sipping wine.

She stands at a podium, center-stage, in the musky room with exposed brick walls poised to speak. Just as she's about to start she spots a friend in the crowd she hadn't seen and mouths an excited, "Hey, you made it, that's great!" You get the feeling that in a typically male-dominated world, Annia is crashing 'the boys' club.'

She tucks a stray piece of her dark brown hair behind her ear and, smiling, dives into a passage from the book about learning Arabic, "Food was one of the few things I could talk about in Arabic. But even when I knew the words, I couldn't understand the guttural Iraqi accent. The times I actually communicated seemed like small miracles, and I would whisper the words to myself like a blissful incantation: *Dajaj:* chicken. *Mai:* water…"

Ciezadlo is a natural storyteller. She continues reading about a famous seafood dish, *musquf*, which she traveled Baghdad to find so she could taste it before she wrote about it. She is the type of reporter who is so eager and thorough that she will not only eat the meal, but probably make it as well.

The New York Review of Ideas:
http://www.newyorkreviewofideas.com/2011/06/war-chickpeas/