

## Lights, camera, croquettes - The Food Network visits Martha's at the Plantation

By Danny Solomon

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10:30 a.m. is more of a feeling than a time in most restaurant kitchens. Line cooks and chefs do a culinarily choreographed dance of dishes and hot pots around servers brewing up sweet tea, cutting lemon wedges and hurriedly scribbling down the specials of the day. But last Friday morning in the kitchen at Martha's at the Plantation added one more twist to the teatime tango when Marc Silverstein and his crew from the Food Network stopped by on their last leg of their *Best of Nashville* taste tour. And they came hungry.

With places like Arthur's, Provence Breads and Café, and Mirror on the list, Food Network's weeklong schedule read like a commendable amendment to Nashville's cuisine constitution. "We're not doing any meat-and-threes here," Silverstein said. "I think I'm learning not to be surprised by what we find in any city. Here you would expect every place to be the Loveless or barbecue, but you also have to do Mirror and Martha's to show people the diversity of the city."

Martha's, the resident restaurant at the Belle Meade Plantation, was the perfect setting for the "historic tables" segment. Only 25 feet away, tourists lazily browse the plantation gift shop as ladies in hoop skirts swish by in Civil War-era costumes. But one floor up, among the sea of stainless steel and in a kitchen no bigger than a walk-in closet, a cameraman, a sound tech and a producer joined Silverstein for a close-up of the making of Martha's famous chicken croquettes.

Line cooks brought their own video cameras and recorded the experience in between chopping celery and parsley garnishes while Martha molded mounds of chicken meat by hand. Silverstein stood behind, hands on hips, and asked questions until he paused to pose for the camera, fork and knife in hand, and consumed the croquette over squash casserole with sautéed carrots and sugar snap peas with creamed mushrooms on top.

"I don't pace myself," Silverstein said of his ingestion itinerary. "It's such a rare opportunity to have great chefs cook for you, and you never know how long a gig like this is going to last. It's hard to turn food like this down, even if you're not hungry."

The *Best of* show, originally a once-a-week feature, has boiled up into the big time and has Silverstein and his co-host Jill Cordes running all over the country for a forkful of local flavor. "One of the first restaurants we did was this place in New York," Silverstein remembered. "People were going there every single night, and I asked, 'Is the food here that good?'"

They said, 'No, the food stinks. We just come here because we don't want to miss anything.'"

As a slice of Martha's family recipe fudge pie with peppermint ice cream melted nearby after being filmed, Silverstein reflected on his week. "People don't always appreciate what they have in their own backyard. We went to Mirror, and there was nothing left on my plate. That chef knows how to cook. I've got to put it up there on the list of great places to eat." He paused and added, "Great fancy places, that is. I'm more comfortable at Fat Mo's."

Silverstein, who has worked in both Washington and Baltimore as a reporter, is truly an everyman when it comes to bringing meals to the masses. He's not spouting off about squab, spanakopita, seviche or any other heady "foodie" terminology. "I didn't know much about food before this job," he admitted. "I didn't know how much butter and salt they use in the kitchen. Don't ever put salt on your food in a restaurant. But, then again, fat is flavor."

Before heading off to sign autographs on his Food Network promotional cards with a recipe for autumn squash and escarole strudel on the back, Silverstein put his position into perspective. "I understand the passion, and I understand the expertise that goes into this kind of work. I love talking to chefs, then I go home and try to do what they do. Then again, I watch football players too, and I can't do what they do either. The fact that people really get into this is great for us. We want the normal Joe to realize that if a guy like me can get into Arthur's, they can too."