

SIBA Mtongana reveals what it is like to cook in front of rolling cameras.

What was it like the first time you were on camera?

While I was a food editor at *Drum* magazine, I had a show on Mzansi Magic, *Cooking with Siba*. We used to cook with celebrities. The first time I had to speak on camera, I asked the producer to get everyone out of the room because they were making me nervous.

How did this compare with your experience when you started *Siba's Table*?

When I first started, they told me I just had to be natural and be myself. But how could I be natural with 30 people looking at me? I think it comes with a bit of experience. You have to bond with the crew, especially the cameraman, who is literally in your face the whole time. I said to my cameraman – who works with Jamie Oliver, Nigella Lawson, and all the big guys – that he needed to smile a little. And sometimes it's not that he isn't smiling, he's just concentrating on what he's doing. But because I'm seeing his face all the time, you become quite self-conscious of your actions.

How have things changed over the years?

It's been quite a long journey since then. And I think one gets more comfortable as you interact with the camera. I'm no longer intimidated. I can do an interview anywhere and still be me because I'm more experienced now. But in the beginning it was quite intimidating.

How do you keep the show 'natural'?

The show is unscripted in order for me to feel natural. We tried it scripted and it didn't work. They will guide me where we have to do certain lines for the introduction, but everything else is just me sharing with people. So that's what makes it more natural.

It's like when people sing and they get in the zone. And when they are on stage, something takes over and they just get this comfort. When I'm in the kitchen and I'm cooking, it's my thing

Why do you think the show has been such a global sensation?

I think it's a combination of things. First, people feel that what they see on television is who I am in real life. When we signed with Food Network, I said to them that even though it's an international platform, I need the real me to come through.

People have to connect with the presenter. Realness – a person being who they are and not pretending to be someone else – is important in our time. I guess that's why reality shows are so popular!

Second, the production of the show is amazing. The production company – Scripps Networks Interactive, a media company with lifestyle brands, including the Cooking Channel, Food Network, Travel Channel and more – is in London and comes down every time we have to film.

We work hard on putting it together. You should come and see

Being **Siba-licious** and just loving it

Siba's Table was the first TV show by a non-American presenter to reach 60 million homes in the US (Take that, Trevor Noah). Eugene Yiga speaks to Siba Mtongana to find out her secret.



Siba Mtongana wows international food fanatics with her tantalising dishes.

my kitchen when we test recipes. It's havoc! We test them over and over to make sure that everything works. We try different things – for example, temperatures or roasting something for a longer or shorter time – so that we can have all the

information we need to help people, especially those who have not cooked before.

It's unfortunate that we have only 21 minutes on air. There are so many other things that I teach that have to be cut because we just don't

have enough time.

What can we expect from the second season of *Siba's Table*?

I wanted to make what our grandparents used to make, but give it a light, inclusive, and modern



"I'm no longer intimidated. I can do an interview anywhere and still be me because I'm more experienced now," says TV host Siba Mtongana

twist. I also wanted to draw on more experiences from my childhood, which is what makes me who I am. That happens a lot in my cooking.

For example, I remember braaiing fish once. If it's in foil, the bottom part will braai, but the top part won't. And then I remembered how, as a child, they used to put coals on top of food. Now it makes sense why they did that.

How do you hope to change overseas perceptions about South Africa?

For the international audience, I want them to know what we eat. South Africans will know bread baked in a tin, but other people won't. Maybe they'll know a bobotie or a *melktert*, but that's about it. They'll have no idea about everything else. Once, when I was in Lisbon, I said I was going to make a wonderful relish that is traditional to South Africa, called *chakalaka*. And they said: "Waka-waka! It's time for Africa!"

How do you feel about your life right now?

I believe that God has opened an opportunity for me and for that I say thank you. Being a celebrity is a privilege because you get to decide what you're going to influence people with. And I decided to influence people to enjoy their time in the kitchen because I believe food needs to be a pleasurable experience for everyone. I also believe in family values like loving your husband, loving your children, and being happy. I'm happily married, I have two wonderful kids, and life is good!

Speaking of your family, will your husband continue to feature in the show?

He's such a support. There are times when I just feel like I can't do it and Brian is the one who says that I should see what he sees in me. He's that strength that keeps me going even when I feel like I can't. We are one.

What do you love most about being in the kitchen?

It's like when people sing and they get in the zone. And when they are on stage, something takes over and they just get this comfort. When I'm in the kitchen and I'm cooking, it's my thing.

What's your favourite dish?

I don't have one specific recipe. I experiment a lot. For three months, I'll be into a certain thing. And then after some time, I'll be on something else altogether. It all depends on my mood.

● *The second season of Siba's Table Fast Feasts airs on Food Network (DStv channel 175) every Friday at 8pm. Siba Mtongana is self-publishing her cookbook, My Table, later this year.*