

Siba-licious

Siba's Table was the first TV show with a non-American presenter to reach 60 million homes in the US. (Take that, Trevor Noah!) Eugene Yiga speaks to the show's host, Siba Mtongana, our homegrown celebrity chef

WHAT WAS IT LIKE THE FIRST TIME YOU WERE ON CAMERA?

While I was still a food editor at *Drum* magazine, I had a show on DSTV's Mzansi Magic called *Cooking with Siba* where we cooked with local celebrities. The first time I had to speak on camera, I asked the producer to please get everyone out of the room because they were making me so nervous!

HOW DID THIS COMPARE TO YOUR EXPERIENCE WHEN YOU STARTED SIBA'S TABLE ON US TV CHANNEL FOOD NETWORK?

When I first started *Siba's Table*, the directors told me that I just had to be natural and to 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.

HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED OVER THE YEARS?

It's been quite a long journey but thankfully I became more comfortable as I learnt how to interact with the camera. I'm now no longer intimidated. I can do an interview anywhere and still be me, thanks to my hard-won experience.

HOW DO YOU KEEP YOUR SHOW FEELING 'NATURAL'?

The show is unscripted in order for me

'It's like when someone who sings steps on stage and they get "in the zone". When I'm in the kitchen, that's my thing'



Check out Siba's sell-out cookbook success *My Table* (Pilo Vision Media), which features 120 recipes from season one of Food Network's *Siba's Table*.

to feel natural. We tried it scripted and it just didn't work. The directors will now guide me when I 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.

WHY DO YOU THINK SIBA'S TABLE HAS BEEN SUCH A GLOBAL SENSATION?

People feel that what they see on TV is who I am in real life, which is true. When I signed with Food Network, I said to the producers that even though it's an international platform, I still needed the real me to come through. People have to connect with the presenter. Authenticity – 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!

HOW DO YOU HOPE TO CHANGE AN OVERSEAS AUDIENCE'S PERCEPTION 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. Once when I was in Lisbon, I said I was going to make a wonderful relish that's traditional to South Africa called *chakalaka*. And they said, 'Waka-Waka! It's time for Africa!'

WHAT'S IT LIKE WORKING WITH THE PRODUCTION COMPANY?

The production of the show is amazing. The production company [Scripps Networks Interactive, a media company with lifestyle brands including Cooking Channel, Food Network, Travel Channel and more] is based in London and they come down

every time we have to film. We work hard on putting it together. You should come and see my kitchen when we test recipes. It's havoc!

WHAT MAKES TESTING RECIPES SO CHAOTIC?

Well, we test them over and over to make sure that everything works. We try different things – for example, different temperatures, or roasting something for longer or shorter periods of time – so that we can have all the information we need in order to help people, especially those who have never cooked before.

It's unfortunate that we only have 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.

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.

I decided to influence people to enjoy their time in the kitchen because I believe that food needs to be a pleasurable experience for everyone. I also believe in family values like loving your husband, loving your kids and being happy. I'm happily married, I have wonderful kids and life is good!

WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT BEING IN THE KITCHEN?

It's like when people sing and they get in 'the zone', or when they're on stage, something takes over and they just feel comfortable. When I'm in the kitchen and I'm cooking, that's my thing.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE DISH RIGHT NOW?

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



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