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COOKING FOR AFRICA

SIBA MTONGANA

When executives from the Food Network in the UK began conducting interviews for a new South African TV series, they knew that they were in for a challenge. But when Siba Mtongana walked into the One&Only Cape Town, they realised that they had found their next star.



KOM VAAR SAAM MET *Elvis Blue!*



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Elke jaar, vanaf **1-7 September**, is SA Huweliksweek, 'n veldtog wat deur INTIEM geloods is om 'n hernude fokus op die huwelik te plaas. Huweliksweek herinner mense nie net aan hoe nodig die herstel van huwelike is nie, maar ook aan hoe lekker 'n suksesvolle huwelik kan wees!

Dis 'n bewusmakingsveldtog waarin kerke, beraders, besighede, bekende persoonlikhede, die media, paartjies en individue almal 'n rol speel om die huwelik as instelling op te hef.

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✕ “I was working late in the office when I got the call,” says Siba. “I was very tired and was on a deadline. And I heard a different voice – very English – and knew it wasn’t from around here. I knew something must be up!”

Siba’s love for cooking began while she was growing up in a small town in the Eastern Cape. They had a small garden (before gardening became fashionable, by the way) with onions, spinach, potatoes, tomatoes, beets, and other veggies which Siba’s mother would ask her to pick every night for her to cook.

“It was always a back and forth interaction with me and her when I was younger,” Siba recalls. “And I would always observe, and be very interested. One time, she added a bit of salt to a dish, and I asked, ‘Okay, mamma, how do you know how much salt to add?’ And she said, ‘You just feel it with your hands.’ And I touched the salt and asked her how she felt it with her hands. And she said that I’d learn when I was older.”

Not only did Siba learn about cooking, but she now gets to teach millions of viewers about it too. Her show, *Siba’s Table*, is one of the most popular cooking shows in South Africa, with almost six million viewers tuning in to watch last year’s season. It’s also one of the most watched Food Network shows in the UK, has a massive following in Poland, and is the first South African cooking show to air on American TV.

“Never in my wildest dreams did I think that my name would be known in so many different countries,” says Siba. “I’m very happy and very humbled. I love my job, I love my family, and I’m very grateful for all of it.”

Speaking of her family, the show has had an impact on her husband Brian almost as much as on Siba. “He’s head of design for the company he works for,” she says. “And every time he’s in the lift, everyone stops him!”

It’s the same when the two are out shopping. Almost everywhere they go – in markets, in the car, and even at petrol stations – people stop them to say how much they love the show. “I’m always happy to take lots of pictures with them and hear people say that I’m just like the lady they see on television,” she says. “Yes, it’s for real. That’s who I am. There’s no façade. It’s just me.”

One of the reasons Siba loves food is because of its ability to bring people together. That’s why she’s also happy that the show has a “Rainbow Nation” appeal, instead of only appealing to people of a certain religion or race. Perhaps it’s the reason her overseas following is growing at such a rate, and the reason she’s had the opportunity to travel to many countries around the world.

“I was at the Taste of Dubai with the Food Network in April last year where I was one of the chefs with Jenny [Morris] and Reza [Mahammad],” she says. “That was amazing. And when we launched *Siba’s Table* last year, we did a Christmas series in London. We also went to Portugal, and I had such a good reception there as well.”

But things were a little different in Belgium. “South Africans are very warm and very welcoming and it’s very easy for people to feel at home,” Siba says. “But in Belgium they were quite intense. And this one lady, who is one of the biggest journalists in the country, said that if you can impress Belgians with your food, then you’ll impress anyone in the

world. I was quite panicky – crossing my fingers and my toes and everything else. But we did the demonstration and they really enjoyed the food!”

Even as she’s gained a massive following, Siba retains her cooking philosophy. “My mom never used a recipe book in her life, but she created such delicious food,” she says. “And I’m actually quite like that as well. How I create my recipes is that I have to do it freehand first without measuring anything. Then the next time I do it I’ll have my book nearby and I’ll make notes as I go along. And I must make the changes then, otherwise I’ll forget.”

The producers already have a new series in production, in which they hope to develop the characters they meet in the locations they go to. But Siba’s big dreams go beyond just cooking. When the executives asked to her speak about herself during her first audition for the show, she spoke a lot about her plans to give back to the community.

It’s the reason she’s proud to work with Food Bank South Africa, securing funding to provide food to orphanages, old age homes, and many others around the country. It’s also the reason her ultimate dream is to work with the United Nations in their food and nutrition groups.

“One of the core pillars of who I am is the belief that to whom much is given, much is expected,” she says. “And giving back is something I’m already doing. I go to different schools and I inspire youngsters to let them know that they can do anything if they dream big and study hard. My role is to go there and pump them up and make them understand that, regardless of what their current circumstances are, they can go further.” ✕



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