

A Canned Illusion

A life in food television isn't as easy as it looks; in fact, sometimes it's not what it looks like at all.

BY VIRGINIA WILLIS



Many moons ago, I found myself in a small television-studio bathroom having a crying jag over a failed ginger flan. It seemed my life and my culinary career were over. Fortunately, someone extricated me from the recesses of my private asylum and convinced me to return to the kitchen.

I've put more than 1,000 television cooking shows beneath my belt since my food and television career started 12 years ago — and I've endured what seems like a thousand life lessons similar to that of the failed flan. I started as a lowly unpaid apprentice with former Atlanta resident and Southern cooking expert Nathalie Dupree. Since then, I've cooked for President Clinton, Michelin-starred chef Roger Vergé and Aretha Franklin, and I've made Lapin Moutarde à la Normande with Julia Child. My work has taken me from picking yellow lemons on the steep, sunny cliffs of Amalfi, Italy, to the cold, windy coast of Connecticut, where I tasted an oyster straight from the salty waters of the Atlantic.

From my jobs with Dupree, I moved on to France to learn cookbook writing with culinary expert Anne Willan and then was an editor for *The All New Joy of Cooking*. But the sirens of television called my name, which led me to work with grill master Bobby Flay and eventually to the kitchen door of Martha Stewart Living Television. I've also traveled the world with Epicurious TV and am now the producer for the Turner South television show "Home Plate."

Food television, at its best, is entertainment and education. Sometimes it's just one or the other. In the worst circumstances it's neither. In any case, it is often a grand illusion. Herbs are miraculously

chopped, lettuces are always cleaned and twenty-pound turkeys cook during two-minute commercial breaks. Watch carefully and sometimes you will see there is actually no real cooking in front of the camera. It's all an illusion. There is, however, always an army of cooks behind the scenes really getting the job done.

"Living" With Martha

As one might imagine, at Martha Stewart, where I was kitchen director, there was no illusion of much of anything and a very real emphasis on perfection. (And, yes, Martha really does want to learn something new every day.) Instead of sending a lackey to the market, it was my job to go to Union Square and the myriad of Manhattan markets several times a week. More than once, I found myself bundled up on a cold morning perusing a case or two of pears for the perfect, unblemished dozen with stems and leaves attached.

Working for Martha was incredible. People often ask was she nice, was she mean, and on and on. Frankly, the experiences were astonishing. When we cooked for President Clinton, I called a fisherman in Alaska and had him go catch a salmon

that afternoon. He sent it overnight for our luncheon the following day. The fish was so tender and succulent it really seemed a shame to cook it.

While everything did not turn out perfect all the time (and, yes, those times could be less than pleasant), while working with Martha, we were surrounded by first-rate people who gave 150 percent, and we had seemingly limitless resources. I was well compensated and I, too, learned something new every day. Who could ask more?

Eventually it was time to move on. When I resigned from MSL, I didn't know if it was the right career move. But two weeks after my arrival at Epicurious, they asked me if I would go to Italy for a few weeks. I had hit the food TV jackpot. *They wanted to pay me for this?!*

Breakfast In Italy

A few weeks later, our crew pulled up to a remote harbor in Sicily around 5:30 a.m. as the boats were coming in. It was barely light, and I soon realized I was one of three women among 500 fishermen on the dock.

They greeted us with leering whistles,

big grins and lots of flirting. My colleague, Michael Lomanaco, former chef at Windows on the World, quickly became my older brother who kept the wolves at bay. One older man with gnarled hands gave me a brilliant yellow starfish as large as a dinner plate. But the tall, dark stranger who truly won my heart served me a sandwich made of hearty, homemade semolina bread, freshly marinated anchovies and olive oil — a Sicilian fisherman's breakfast.

Michael explained that the boats go out at night with great lanterns to simulate the moon and draw the anchovies into the nets. The men take a few fish from the first catch and remove the bones. They place the filets in a bowl and drizzle them with freshly squeezed lemon juice and olive oil, then heartily season the mix with salt and pepper. The fish cures during the night much like ceviche or escabèche. When they return in the morning with their catch, breakfast is ready.

Despite what goes on for the cameras, the people I meet in my work and travels are very real. Expressing the joy and passion I have for them and my profession is perhaps impossible — much like that odd Sicilian breakfast, which had a taste beyond words. In this world of food television, so much of the atmosphere is manufactured; so much that seems real is not. But I am thankful and blessed. I am well fed in the spirit, the soul and the table, and that is something that is most certainly not an illusion.

Virginia Willis is a culinary television producer based in Atlanta and author of Pasta Dinners 1,2,3 and co-author of Home Plate Cooking.