



No Bams, No Tricks, Just Food and a City

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER

As a rule, the stars of cooking shows tend to be chefs with their respective affectations — a propensity for screeching, exotic knife trickery or flaunting sex appeal. But the latest entry into the genre focuses not on the chef, but rather his venue, a federal-style mansion that has housed generations of New York mayors, and the city itself, a giant vendor of ethnic goods reflecting the city that the chef is cooking for.

"What's Cooking at Gracie," the low-budget, cheerful offspring of NYC TV, the cable station run by the city, chronicles the culinary adventures of Feliberto Estévez, the chef at Gracie Mansion since 2002. He hopscoches his way through the city's ethnic enclaves in search of ingredients with his two sidekicks, a former Miss Virginia cum talk show host named Julie Laipply and a press aide to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Jordan Barowitz.

In each episode, Mr. Estévez (who is known as Fili) and his co-hosts hit a New York neighborhood to gather groceries for a menu served at Gracie Mansion, then return there to cook it. The program airs on Tuesdays at 8 p.m. and is repeated on Wednesdays at 3:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. and Fridays at 9 p.m.

Gracie Mansion has traditionally served as the mayor's home. But Mr. Bloomberg opted to stay in his Upper East Side town house after he was elected in 2001, and the mansion has become a giant catering hall of sorts for various city events.

There are receptions held at the mansion to honor ethnic groups, celebrations and industries, and the food often mirrors the guest list: chicharrón de cerdo for the Dominican Day Parade celebration, fried chicken at a private dinner with the comfort-food-loving mayor, outdoor barbecue for a reception in honor of the Belmont Stakes.

Ingredients are equally local: bread and cheese from Arthur Avenue in the Bronx, special Pakistani sweets from a merchant in Jackson Heights.

In "What's Cooking at Gracie," Mr. Estévez demonstrates for his co-hosts what he does to get ready for large receptions, beginning with the shopping.

For their episode on Dominican cooking,

Mr. Barowitz and Ms. Laipply caught up with Mr. Estévez in Washington Heights, where they picked up pork belly, green plantains and chayote. There was plenty of banter about pork with the butcher, and, this being New York public television, a plug for the neighborhood.

Back at Gracie Mansion, Mr. Estévez chopped, folded and sizzled his way through a menu of chicharrón de cerdo, tostones, pastelitos de chayote and guava crème brûlée. Instructions pop up on the bottom of the screen, but anyone trying to follow the recipes is far better served by going to

www.nyc.gov/html/nyctv.

Ms. Laipply and Mr. Barowitz have their roles, too. He is the foodie home cook, who sniffs eggplants and chops on street food in Chinatown, and nods knowingly at fish tweezers. Ms. Laipply is clearly unskilled in the ways of the kitchen, grimacing at tomatillos and marveling that a piece of salmon is not smelly.

"The response when I told my family I was working on a cooking show was laughter!" Ms. Laipply said in an e-mail message. "In summary, my version of cooking was popping a Lean Cuisine in the micro-



Photographs by Stephanie Keith for The New York Times

FRESH TV Feliberto Estévez, top left, the Gracie Mansion chef, shopping with Jordan Barowitz and Julie Laipply. Above, Mr. Barowitz being filmed at a Dominican store.

On the air, meals that are fit for a king. Or at least a mayor.

wave and pressing the start button."

That changed, she added, when the show began last spring. "I can make an awesome guacamole! I know what sweating an onion is! I cut green peppers and dice tomatoes! I can even blanch zucchini!"

Mr. Barowitz came up with the idea for a cooking show while working at a reception at Gracie Mansion, where he started picking over the leftover foie gras and cooking it up on the broiler. Seth Unger, director of creative development for NYC TV, said he eagerly embraced the idea.

Mr. Barowitz said the show is unlike most celebrity chef programs. "The goal of the show is to appeal to people who cook but also who want to learn about New York and its neighborhoods," he said. "The idea is that Julie is the novice, I'm the intramural player and Fili is the pro."

All of them work for no pay, given the station's tiny budget.

"The first episode was a huge challenge," said Mr. Estévez, who is from the Dominican Republic. "People were saying to me, 'Start saying! Start explaining!' But I enjoy it a lot. I like being able to say, 'If you do this with a rolling pin this way, your pizza will come out better.'"

GUAVA CRÈME BRÛLÉE

Adapted from Feliberto Estévez

Time: 1 hour

- 8 large egg yolks
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1 cup frozen guava purée (available at Hispanic markets), defrosted
- Granulated sugar.

1. Heat oven to 300 degrees. Place a kettle of water over high heat, to bring to a boil. Put egg yolks in a mixing bowl, and set aside. Place cream in a small saucepan over medium heat, to bring to a simmer.

2. When cream simmers, remove it from heat. Whisk yolks vigorously, while adding cream in a slow, thin stream. (Do not add cream too quickly or mixture will curdle.)

3. Pour cream mixture through a fine mesh strainer into a bowl. Add guava purée, and stir until blended. Pour into six half-cup ramekins, and set in a small baking dish. Carefully add boiling water to come halfway up sides of ramekins. Bake until set, about 45 minutes. Remove ramekins from water, and allow to cool.

4. Just before serving, cover surface of each ramekin with a thin layer of granulated sugar. Caramelize sugar under a broiler or with a kitchen blowtorch, until light golden brown and crisp. Serve immediately.

Yield: 6 servings.