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John T. Greilick / The Detroit News

Marc Silverstein, host of the Food Network's "The Best Of," observes Terenia Peczeniuk the kitchen at Under the Eagle in Hamtramck.

Detroit eats get the spotlight

Food Network sweeps into town to highlight favorite restaurants

By Molly Abraham / Special to The Detroit News



John T. Greilick / The Detroit News

Traditional Polish dishes, including blintzes and stuffed cabbage, grace the table at Under the Eagle.

Restaurants on the shows

"The Best Of" hosts Marc Silverstein and Jill Cordes and their crews are in town this week taping at numerous restaurant locations for future shows on the Food Network. The shows will air in about six months.

Among the restaurants they've already visited are:

- * The American Coney Island and its neighbor, Lafayette Coney Island, on Lafayette Boulevard at Michigan Avenue in downtown Detroit.

- * The Corner, 100 Townsend St., Birmingham.

- * East Franklin Street Restaurant, 1440 Franklin St., Detroit.

- * Under the Eagle, 9000 Jos. Campau Ave., Hamtramck.

- * Roma Cafe, 3401 Riopelle St., Detroit.

- * Zingerman's Deli, 422 Detroit St., Ann Arbor.

Where they'll be

Other places the crews are expected to visit today through Sunday include:

* Buddy's Pizza, 17125 Conant St., Detroit.

* Cafe Cortina, 30715 W. 10 Mile, Farmington Hills.

* Grill/Ritz-Carlton, 300 Town Center Drive, Dearborn.

* Sweet Potato Sensations, 17346 Lahser Road, Detroit.

* Steve's Soul Food, 8443 Grand River Ave., Detroit.

* Streetside Seafood, 273 Pierce St., Birmingham.

* Tribute, 31425 W. 12 Mile, Farmington Hills.

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HAMTRAMCK -- It was well before 10 a.m. on Tuesday when the host of the Food Network's "The Best Of" series, Marc Silverstein, and his crew of three -- camera operator Larry Deal, sound man Steve Sullivan and producer Melissa Brown -- pulled up to Under the Eagle in Hamtramck and unloaded their equipment.

They were 20 minutes early for the first shoot of the day, a day that would last until well past 10 p.m. when they finally went back to their hotel after taping at their second destination, East Franklin Street Restaurant, the soul food restaurant in Detroit's Rivertown district.

The grueling 12-plus hour day -- including an unscheduled two-hour stop at the emergency room at Henry Ford Hospital when cameraman Deal had a sudden health problem -- will result in only about nine minutes of finished videotape. The two separate segments will air on the popular channel on different dates sometime next fall.

Good thing this is a "blue collar" crew, as soundman Sullivan describes it. He and the others had flown in on Monday for a week in Metro Detroit covering such diverse locations as Roma Cafe, Sweet Potato Sensations, the American and Lafayette coney islands and the Grill Room at the Ritz-Carlton.

The first stop at Under the Eagle, a small restaurant on Jos. Campau Street where dill pickle soup, kielbasa, sauerkraut and pierogi have kept people happy for 30 years now, would focus on the solid Polish fare prepared by Terenia Peczeniuk and her staff.

Shots of Peczeniuk expertly folding bundles of Savoy cabbage around meat filling, dishing up dill pickle soup and sauerkraut, pulling steaming pans from the oven will be winnowed down to about 4 1/2 minutes of finished product for a segment on "The Best Of" series, which explores the fare in restaurants across the United States and beyond.

Each half-hour show includes five restaurants in five different cities. Under the Eagle will turn up in a show on Ethnic Eateries. It's just one of several pieces that will result from the network's six-day visit to Detroit, which wraps up on Sunday. The restaurants were chosen from recommendations of people who know the Metro Detroit food scene.

Another "The Best Of" host, Jill Cordes, and her crew have also been taping at locations in Metro Detroit this week. The two hosts were scheduled to meet up on Thursday at the Battle of the Coney Islands at downtown's American and Lafayette coney islands.

A bonus for the chosen restaurants is that the shows run not just once, but repeatedly, and over a long enough span, says Silverstein, for fashions and hair styles to look dated.

Under the Eagle's Peczeniuk and her husband, Phillip, their 16-year-old daughter Suzanna, who had been given a reprieve from classes at Marian High School for the occasion, and the rest of the staff were ready for the visiting TV people on Tuesday morning. Pots were already boiling in the small kitchen where Terenia, in a peasant-style blouse embroidered with yellow and purple flowers, didn't seem at all intimidated by the spotlight.

"My wife hasn't had time to get nervous," said Phillip Peczeniuk. "They called just two weeks ago."

Maybe even more important, though, was the easy-going attitude of host Silverstein, casually dressed in a bright blue and white striped shirt and dark Banana Republic chinos, and not much more intimidating than the guy coming in to fix the plumbing.

A former TV consumer reporter in Baltimore and Columbus and free-lance news reporter for NBC in Washington, D.C., Silverstein doesn't project any kind of star aura. If anyone had been expecting a celebrity presence, they got a pleasant surprise in this Wilmington, Del., native who prefers Philadelphia cheese steaks to rare duck breast.

Though the "Best Of" shows are seen by a huge audience, you wouldn't know it by Silverstein's unpretentious style. Dipping into a plate of sauerkraut (My favorite!) as he bantered with Peczeniuk in the kitchen, chatting with the early lunch customers who wandered in, and watching the lunch plates emerging from the kitchen ("Some people can have dessert after that?"), he admitted that this is the kind of restaurant he especially likes.

He also prefers the clientele of such neighborhood spots who are friendlier and more welcoming to the upheaval caused by the taping. In some upscale restaurants, he says, patrons often complain about the lights and don't want to be bothered with questions.

As producer Melissa Brown watched him sampling the chicken encased in potato pancakes -- a dish devised by Peczeniuk and named after her daughter -- she commented, "The week before and the week after (filming), we're on SlimFast."

The crew generally films one week and takes the next week off. They were in Las Vegas two weeks ago, where Larry Deal first experienced the inner ear problem that sent him to Ford Hospital on Tuesday. They'll head for Chicago in two weeks.

After Deal was treated for the problem that affected his equilibrium, he felt well enough to go on to East Franklin Street Restaurant, to finish off the day's shooting in the kitchen where head cook Sandra Grant proved to be a tougher interview than the voluble Terenia Peczeniuk.

But it wasn't long before Silverstein got her talking about her special recipe for collard greens -- she uses sugar, not vinegar, and smoked turkey wings rather than pork, "because a lot of people don't want pork" she explained -- and the rest of the menu of fried chicken and catfish, baby back ribs and candied yams.

The menu served in the 100-year-old building on Franklin Street, a plucky survivor of the once-thriving Warehouse District next to the Detroit River, will be featured in a segment on Soul Food Sensations.

When cameraman Deal took a break and started digging in to the plate of baby back ribs he'd just photographed, Silverstein and the others looked genuinely relieved at his recovery.

But the day wasn't done yet. They still had to tape a poetry reading in the Key Club on the second floor of the restaurant, a cocktail lounge and cigar bar that adds an unusual element to the restaurant.

"People can't believe it," said Silverstein. "But we do actually work."

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Robin Buckson / The Detroit News

Silverstein tastes some collard greens during an interview with chef Sandra Grant at the East Franklin Street Restaurant in Detroit. The show will focus on several of Metro Detroit's best restaurants.