

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# A Martha Stewart Restaurant Has Opened in Las Vegas. Is That a Good Thing?

The original food and lifestyle influencer has never been involved in a restaurant — until now.

**By Pete Wells**

Pete Wells is the chief restaurant critic for The New York Times. He traveled to Las Vegas in September to eat at the Bedford by Martha Stewart.

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The Arc de Triomphe stands in the same place it always has, just off the Strip beside the Paris Drive entrance to the Paris Las Vegas hotel and casino. These days, though, it looks a little different.

One side of the half-scale replica of the monument honoring the dead heroes of French wars is now hidden behind a giant photograph honoring a living hero of American media. Her shoulder-length blond bob parted just off-center, she looks down at the gamblers and shoppers with the benevolent smile that has reassured millions that they, too, can carve intricate lacy patterns into hollowed eggshells with a small pneumatic drill.

Martha Stewart has arrived in Sin City.

Ms. Stewart's image adorns a scale model of the Arc de Triomphe outside the casino. Saeed Rahbaran for The New York Times

A dining area spills out into Le Boulevard, a pedestrian passage in the casino. Saeed Rahbaran for The New York Times

In August, a 194-seat restaurant calling itself the Bedford by Martha Stewart opened inside the Paris. It sits just off the gaming floor on Le Boulevard, an imaginary French street with a painted sky and imitation paving stones that shine as if it had just rained. Sharing Le Boulevard with chez Martha is, among other establishments, a lounge called Napoleon's where two piano players work in tandem. While I ate, I could hear them bang out "Friends in Low Places." About half an hour later, when dinner was over, they launched into it again.

On this avenue of cultural pileups, the Bedford by Martha Stewart is an earth-toned oasis of calm. It is a cribbage board in a video-game arcade, a glass of ginger ale at a tiki bar. Ms. Stewart, in a news release, said the restaurant offers "the same dishes that I serve to family and friends in my own home," a restored farmhouse on 156 acres in the town of Bedford in Westchester County, N.Y.

A pergola inspired by one at Ms. Stewart's 156-acre farm in Bedford, N.Y., was built in front of Le Boulevard's French-style facades. Saeed Rahbaran for The New York Times

Ms. Stewart has never been involved in a restaurant before. Ascertaining the exact nature of her involvement, though, was not a quick process. After putting the question to the casino's owner, Caesars Entertainment, I received an email two days later from Ms. Stewart's public-relations firm:

"The Bedford by Martha Stewart is owned by Caesars Entertainment and is a licensing partnership with Marquee Brands and Martha Stewart, where Ms. Stewart helms the restaurant's concept from design and décor to food and beverage recipes. Ms. Stewart and her team adapted her recipes for the restaurant environment with Chef Pierre Schaedelin."

In other words, the Bedford is not Ms. Stewart's "first restaurant," as many news reports have said. It is not, in fact, "hers" at all. She is neither an owner nor the chef. It is almost certainly, however, the first Martha Stewart-themed restaurant.

The copperware displayed in the kitchen is also sold on Ms. Stewart's new e-commerce site. Saeed Rahbaran for The New York Times

Ms. Stewart had a lot of say over the interior design and the menu, which meanders from such vintage American restaurant standards as oysters Rockefeller to French and Italian basics, like lemon risotto. Details from her Westchester property, including the clematis that climb her pergola and the gleaming copper pans that hang in her kitchen, have been imported to Las Vegas. But there seem to have been limits to her control. I have to imagine that it was not her idea to install the large wide-screen TVs behind the bar that allowed me to watch the Miami Hurricanes play the Aggies of Texas A&M while I ate.

You don't have to be the kind of superfan who knows that the columns on Ms. Stewart's own pergola are antique granite posts from China to suspect that nobody watches the ballgame when Ms. Stewart throws a dinner party at home. It is a small detail, but her entire reputation was built on details, many of them much smaller than those TVs.

Her brand revolves around her sense of style and her taste. At the same time, her style and taste have been so persuasive to so many people in large part because of Ms. Stewart's success in business. There have always been two Marthas: Martha the Powerful and Martha the Tasteful. They draw strength from each other. They need each other. To eat at the Bedford is to realize, again and again, that Martha the Powerful has put her name on a restaurant whose details would never meet the approval of Martha the Tasteful.

Carts that roll from table to table are used to present roast chicken and other dishes. Saeed Rahbaran for The New York Times

To understand why the two Marthas have gone their separate ways in Las Vegas, it may help to know that Marquee Brands bought Martha Stewart's company, including rights to her intellectual property, for a reported \$175 million in 2019. Marquee Brands, which itself is owned by an investment-management firm, has been busy licensing Ms. Stewart's name and endorsement to a varied array of products: CBD gummies, sneakers, garlic, cat litter, lighters, a \$12 California wine called Martha's Chard, short-sleeved quilted down vests, fertilizer and pumpkin-spice coffee, which she promoted in a video wearing, seemingly, nothing but an apron printed with the coffee brand's logo. And now there is the Bedford by Martha Stewart.

One effect of all these endorsements is that Ms. Stewart, at 81, appears busier than ever, a role model for younger influencers for whom the word "hustle" has never had a negative connotation. This activity is largely an illusion, a matter of business deals that put her name behind other people's products. But it is easy for people to accept because it seems to continue the pattern of Ms. Stewart's earlier career.

Her first book, "Entertaining," published in 1982, used her success as a caterer to advance the notion that a modern liberated woman, to use the language of that era, could take pleasure and even pride in making eggnog and sugar cookies from scratch. In the 1990s, her magazine Martha Stewart Living made upward mobility part of its appeal; lavishly illustrated how-to guides scrubbed the dirt and hard times from skills that were once matters of farmhouse economy, and often survival, so that Mason jars of dill pickles and platters of dried pears could be displayed as markers of taste and status in suburban ranch houses and Upper West Side brownstones.

Although Ms. Stewart has never been involved with a restaurant before, her contributions to the current food culture are considerable. Saeed Rahbaran for The New York Times

Her most potent contribution to the current food culture may be her early, unerring and ongoing ability to place herself at the center of all this baking and canning and dehydrating. A brand and an influencer for years before those were common career goals, Ms. Stewart is the original that all the young recipe developers try to copy when they supply their Instagram feeds with casually impressive food

photographed in natural light inside uncluttered rooms. Whether they know it or not, they are imitating Ms. Stewart, though most of them have to do it without her armies of test-kitchen cooks, photographers, prop stylists and assistants.

Then there are the recipes — thousands of them. These did not break new ground, as a rule. The basic sensibility was known around the Martha test kitchens as “classics with a twist.” The idea was to take something familiar and unthreatening — macaroni and cheese, say — and give it the Martha Stewart touch.

But because almost any dish could be Martha-fied, no individual Martha recipe needed to be particularly original. And in reality, very few were. You can wade for hours through [marthastewart.com](http://marthastewart.com) without finding a dish that belongs to Ms. Stewart as unmistakably as tomato sauce with butter and half an onion belongs to Marcella Hazan.

That hardly mattered in the context of her media businesses. It does matter, though, in the context of the Bedford.

Baked potatoes are smashed on a board, then dressed with butter and salt. Saeed Rahbaran for The New York Times

The core promise made by Martha Stewart in all her manifestations is that we could do it ourselves, just like Martha, and that the simple act of doing it would make us feel good. How this promise would be mapped on to a Las Vegas restaurant was a little unclear.

Would I be taking a chef's knife to Alexis's Chopped Salad myself, laying out the haricots verts, tomatoes and bell peppers on a Hello Sunshine cutting board ( "in natural bamboo emblazoned with lemon decals") from the Martha Stewart Collection at Macy's? Would I make an elegant centerpiece for my table by stacking pink porcelain doll pumpkins in the shape of a tulipière vase?

No and no. Dinner at the Bedford by Martha Stewart is less a participatory activity than a spectator sport.

No opportunity has been missed to finish a dish on one of those carts that rolls from table to table. Martha-tinis (bison-grass vodka, vermouth, lemon twist) are mixed and poured at a tableside cocktail cart. Roast chickens are taken apart on a tableside carving cart. If you order a baked potato, one will be presented by a server, raised high in the air and brought down with a resounding thud on the surface of a tableside potato cart.

I somehow doubt that Ms. Stewart slaps baked potatoes on a cart when she has friends over for dinner. It seems even less likely that a potato at her table would be lukewarm, like the \$15.95 one I was served at the Bedford.

Martha-tinis are mixed tableside from vermouth and bison-grass vodka. Saeed Rahbaran  
for The New York Times

The roast chicken, which costs \$89.95, was on its way toward room temperature, too. Steak tartare, \$27.95, was distractingly sweet, as if it had been made with honey mustard instead of Dijon. The cream seemed to have been left out of oysters Rockefeller, \$29.95, which gave the chopped spinach and watercress a mulched-grass texture that might have been produced by the bright-orange mower that Ms. Stewart once rode around her farm, to the delight of her Instagram followers.

Along the way, there were a few Good Things. The bread basket was a showcase of baking skills, from the cherry focaccia to the snowshoe-shaped crackers with sage leaves and thinly shaved vegetables embedded in the crust. It's \$11.95, and worth it. Big Martha's pierogi — as fans know, Big Martha was Ms. Stewart's mother and the source of many Polish recipes — came through in excellent condition, with their potato-and-scallion filling and their brown-butter sauce.

The cooking is supposed to be as comforting and reassuring as the pierogi, but much of it lands somewhere between boring and careless. This is an awkward spot when you are selling \$16 potatoes.

Other cracks appear in the veneer. Arriving a few minutes early for my reservation, I was glad to be offered water but wondered whether the clear disposable cup wasn't a little off brand. It seems unlikely, at any rate, that the cups will be offered for sale on Ms. Stewart's new e-commerce site, martha.com, alongside the copper pans hanging above the kitchen, the faux bois planters under the pergola and other items displayed in the restaurant.

There are some Good Things on the menu, such as pierogi based on a recipe from Ms.  
Stewart's mother. Saeed Rahbaran for The New York Times

Ms. Stewart built a media company worth, at one point, more than \$1 billion. She manages a farm with a greenhouse, stables, corn crib, four horse paddocks, several gardens, livestock and a flock — the word she prefers is an ostentation — of peafowl.

But even Ms. Stewart can't prevent mistakes that happen in a kitchen more than 2,000 miles away whose cooks work, not for her, but for Caesars Entertainment. The Bedford is decent enough that it will probably make money for the Paris and Marquee Brands, but it's ho-hum enough that it just might dim Ms. Stewart's reputation for dazzling competence in everything she touches.

And if you happen to eat there and are left holding the lukewarm potato, at least you will not be the first Las Vegas visitor to learn that the house always wins.

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