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Eastern Shore eateries in the spotlight

Food Network crew tapes segments for cable program

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FAIRHOPE, Ala. — Fans of Guy Fieri have no trouble spotting the host of two popular Food Network programs in a crowd. Beefy with spiked, bleached blonde hair, a dark goatee, multiple tattoos and often wearing skateboarder shorts and sandals, he typically stands out anywhere he goes.

That was the case this week when Fieri, his producers and crew were on the Eastern Shore taping segments for "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives." Onlookers crowded into Guy's Gumbo Shack and Panini Pete's in Fairhope, and Mancini's Antique Club in Daphne, which will each get their 15 minutes of national fame when the completed program airs sometime within the next year.

"People are extremely loyal about their diners, drive-ins and dives," Fieri said on Monday afternoon during a break in taping. "Food is the common denominator of all people, no matter the culture or where they live."

Fieri, who also hosts "GUY'S BIG BITE" on the network, was the season two winner of "The Next Food Network Star" and is currently television pitchman for the T.G.I. Friday's restaurant chain, has a variety of tastes when it comes to cuisine.

"I love it all — anything with big flavor," he said. "I've been cooking since I was about 9 or 10. I had enough steamed rice and vegetables. I made the mistake of asking my mother for chicken parmesan instead of eggplant parmesan. She said, 'If you want it, cook it yourself.'"

Fieri soon entered the food service industry, selling soft pretzels from a three-wheeled bicycle cart he built with his father. He owned his first restaurant at age 26, and was a restaurant manager and district manager for others. He now is co-owner of several restaurants, including Johnny Garlic's, Tex Wasabi's and Russell Ramsay's Chop House.

Describing the eateries profiled on "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives," Fieri said, "It can be anything other than white tablecloth — not corporate. If it's funky, and has a soul, we'll find it."

Alex Mancini, whose Mancini's Antique Club has been a fixture in Daphne since 1924, said they managed to find his place, along with its collection of vintage curiosities lining the walls.

"A customer put our name in," he said. One of



Food Network host Guy Fieri shares a laugh with Guy Berry and his wife, Terra, owners of Guy's Gumbo Shack in Fairhope, while cameraman Anthony "Chico" Rodriguez captures the conversation for a segment of "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives." The cable network will feature three Eastern Shore restaurants on an upcoming episode of the program. Staff photo by Curt Chapman.

the production crews was there for 12 hours Sunday, and returned with Fieri in tow on Tuesday to wrap up production.

Manci said he is sharing with viewers his shrimp po' boy, soft-shell crab, oysters on the half shell, Jazzy Burger, Colonel's Steak Sandwich (with a six-ounce rib-eye) and Bloody Mary.

"When I first talked to the producer, she said 'don't get too excited' because we might not be chosen," he said. "We talked to them about a month before they selected us. You have to meet the qualifications."

Asked to name the category in which his place fits, Manci was quick to point out, "It's a museum. It's not a dive."

Pete Blohme, who owns the beignet and panini restaurant bearing his name, said, "I kind of got on their radar through Mobile Bay Monthly (magazine). They get tips and do their research. They call you and question you."

He noted he received his first call from producers in December, and heard from them again in January and February. They grilled Blohme on how his food is prepared, and asked him to forward photos of his downtown Fairhope restaurant.

The Food Network crew shot there all day Saturday, and Fieri taped segments on Monday. Blohme said, "We went through the beignets and roast beef and turkey paninis." The lively program host was very impressed with Pete's homemade mozzarella, as well as the fresh-cut fries and chips, he said.

"He loved everything we did," Blohme said. "He said making the mozzarella was one of the highlights of the show (to date). He said he's not a sweets guy, but he loved the beignets."

Fieri seemed right at home Monday afternoon in the kitchen of Guy's Gumbo Shack, where he helped make gumbo and prepared a turkey for smoking.

Guy Berry, who owns the restaurant and bar with his wife, Terra, told Fieri on camera that he uses a south Alabama roux as his gumbo base. The television personality listened to more of Berry's techniques while stirring a large metal cooker filled with several gallons of the secret recipe.

"I have had some gumbo from all different parts of the world," Fieri later said. My favorite is 'unyown,' made by Ron Walker in New Orleans. It's a smoked chicken gumbo. I was pretty blown away. Gumbo is like pizza. When it's good, it's really good. When it's bad, it's still good."

Fieri also held court around the Gumbo Shack's outdoor smoker, where turkey, Boston butts, chicken and Conecuh County sausage were being prepared for the onslaught of hungry mouths expected for this weekend's Fairhope Arts and Crafts Festival and the Outdoor Art Show.

Producer Bryna Levin and the crew taped at the Gumbo Shack on Sunday in preparation for Fieri's arrival. Berry said, "They called me out of the blue. I don't know how they found me."

Berry moved to the Eastern Shore from Atlanta and opened the Gumbo Shack on Church Street not long after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. He moved the restaurant to its current



Guy Berry, owner of Guy's Gumbo Shack in Fairhope, and Guy Fieri, host of the Food Network's "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives," check the progress of the nearly 100 pounds of meat being smoked in preparation for the crowds expected to attend the Fairhope Arts and Crafts Festival and the Outdoor Art Show, Friday through Sunday. The segment was taped Monday for a future episode of the program. Staff photo by Curt Chapman.

location, a former laundromat tucked away behind a row of Fairhope Avenue buildings, just over a year ago.

"It's taken a little time to build business," he said. "People that live here — once they find it, they find it."

Folks from far and wide will undoubtedly seek it out, along with the two other restaurants, once the program makes its debut.

Gumbo Shack staffers took the television production disruption in stride. Berry said, "Everybody's been wonderful. They've been working wide open." He planned to close Tuesday to give employees a break.

Of his restaurant's time in the limelight, Blohme said, "It was a pretty neat experience — for the French Quarter and for Fairhope."

To learn more about "Diners, Drive-ins and Dives," or to check air times, visit www.foodnetwork.com.

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