



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

TNT's Beth Belew, left, and a Bristol native, poses with Chef Emeril Lagasse.

Bristol woman behind scenes of TNT show

With "On the Menu," Beth Belew envisioned a TV show that would make a contest out of trying to get dishes literally that — "on the menu" of restaurants that range from barbecue to modern fusion.

Here, a group of passionate home cooks is challenged to create a new signature dish for well-known national restaurants. Next, the winner's dish shows up on menus — the day after the show airs.

"On the Menu" recently made its way to TNT. And you can thank Belew, who grew up in Bristol, Tennessee, for its premiere.

For the past 15 years, this 1997 graduate of Tennessee High School has been living in the Los Angeles area, where she's pursued her passion as a producer. Current title: Director of Unscripted Development for TNT.

"We hear pitches all day long," she said. "People come in with their show ideas."

"On the Menu," she said, needed further development by Belew and her co-workers at TNT. It came to the network from One Three Media and "Survivor" producer Mark Burnett.

"When they brought it to us, it was just the nugget of an idea. We worked with all angles, creatively."

Nearly 20 years ago, Belew gained a passion for working in television while studying in the broadcasting department at Tennessee High School, helping produce "The Viking News" at age 16. "I loved it," she said. "I was totally hooked."

Leaving Bristol, she attended Belmont University in Nashville. Then she transferred to California's Chapman University, where she majored in television production. Belew worked as a freelance producer for about 10 years. Later, she took a job at Discovery Studios, working in development.

Now, she's busy with two new babies — both "On the Menu" and her newborn son, Billy Dixon Dameshek, where she lives in Sherman Oaks, a subdivision of Los Angeles.

She returns to Bristol about once a year to visit her parents, Sam and Betsy Belew, who live on Vance Drive.

While in town, she goes for what's "on the menu" at Bojangle's, saying, "Those biscuits are so good."

With her TV show, Belew gets to work with a famous chef, Emeril Lagasse. "He's fantastic," she said, "and a really nice person."

The show also stars host Ty Pennington.

"And it's so much fun," she said. "It's an incredibly cool premise because you can go out and get the burger that won the next day. So this is the first time that's ever been done."

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Want to watch?

» "On the Menu" airs on Fridays, 8 p.m., on TNT. Upcoming episodes feature California Pizza Kitchen (Oct. 17); Planet Hollywood (Oct. 24); Emeril's Restaurant (Oct. 31); The Cheesecake Factory (Nov. 7); Cabo Wabo/Sammy's Beach Bar & Grill (Nov. 14); Outback Steakhouse (Nov. 21); Buca di Beppo (Nov. 28); Dickey's Barbecue Pit (Dec. 5).

Want more?

» www.tntdrama.com/shows/on-the-menu.html



PHOTOS BY JOE TENNIS/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

At the Graham Mansion, from left to right, clowns Artie Rodriguez and Anthony Iroler get in the act; Troy Black of Galax, Virginia, center, scares passersby on the Trail of Terror; Eugene Cook, of Christiansburg, Virginia, portrays a ghostly man near the mine shaft.

HAUNT HOPPING

Second in a series exploring various Halloween activities in the Mountain Empire.

How to manage a ...

Motley crew of minions

BY JOE TENNIS
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

MAJOR GRAHAMS, Va. — Darkness looms above Wythe County's famous Major Graham Mansion at 7:30 p.m., while a long line, hundreds deep, waits to get inside the haunted house.

Among that crowd is 16-year-old Kelly Babbitt. This long-haired girl has braved tours of this spooky mansion about a half-dozen times in three years. "I honestly just like getting scared," said the student from Bland High School in Rocky Gap, Virginia. Coming here, stashed in the shadows, you'll find a motley crew of bloody faces, painted ladies, goths, clowns and spooky soldiers.

Up front, Mary Lin Brewer takes charge as the friendly drill sergeant, commanding the attraction's army of actors. This middle-aged woman is the co-author of five self-published novels on the mansion. Yet, ironic as it seems, Brewer grew up afraid of things that go bump in the night. "I am a closet chicken," she confessed. "I hated haunted houses. I hated for people to jump out and scare me. I hated to be scared, so it's bizarre that I'm doing this."

What's she doing is scaring thousands each weekend. "And it's so entertaining," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "Behind the scenes is hilarious."

Gretta Aker of Wytheville, Virginia, right, puts Mary Lin Brewer, the mansion director, in a choke hold.



Alan Alderman, of Galax, Virginia, left, portrays a werewolf at the Graham Mansion. A skeleton, right, has met its fate.



If You Go

» **What & Where:** Major Graham Mansion, (above) 2115 Major Grahams Road, Max Meadows, Va., near I-81 Exit 84.
» **When:** Open Oct. 17-18, 24-25, 31-Nov. 1. Runs 7:30-10:30 p.m.
» **How much:** Parking is \$3 cash per vehicle. Admission is \$20 per person (no one under 7 admitted)
» **Info:** 276-284-0006 or www.hauntedgrahammansion.com

'It's way good'

Brewer points to a collection of costumed characters, detailing their place in the "Psycho Ward." She noted one called the "Grim Reaper" and another portraying a vampire. "The vampires rock," Brewer bragged. "It's way good."

Right now, it takes up to 90 minutes to take the entire tour. "Some people close their eyes and run through the whole thing and don't even look at it," Brewer said. "There are surprises. There are sinister surprises at every turn — especially the end." Like when the clowns get

in the act.

"Everybody's terrified of clowns," Brewer said. "And, well, they're everywhere."

Why be afraid of clowns?

"I think it's the fact that the person is hidden behind a facade," said Artie Rodriguez, who portrays a painted face. "The person is no longer visible. The features are no longer there. They're distorted. And people just don't see you as a normal person because the fact that your face is painted completely up."

'Got addicted'

Brewer is tough. She talks of how 80 percent of her crew had to be swapped out after one Halloween season for a new crop of fresh faces. Still, she cites a variety of reasons for incorporating a largely new cast each year, saying, "We require so much from them. It's a team effort."

For 2014, about 150 people are on the staff at this attraction, which ranks among the most popular haunted houses in Southwest Virginia.

"I buy all the costumes," Brewer said. "I go through a lot of thrift stores. And people give us a lot of stuff. And we adapt it."

At least half of the staff is paid; the rest are volunteers. "They're all kinds of people," Brewer said. "They're usually a little young. You just look around."

One mainstay in the cast is Marni Dutton, 38, of Rural Retreat, Virginia. This year marks her third season. "I came out one night, got addicted and have been here since."

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