

SECTION D

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TODAY'S FOCUS: HOME & GARDEN

WHO'S NEXT?

Many
waiting for
chance at
domesticity
throne

But can anybody ever replace Martha Stewart?

By SANDRA BARRERA and
VALERIE KUKLENSKI
LOS ANGELES DAILY NEWS

Martha Stewart was the ultimate homemaker, the wonder woman who could muck out a barn and scatter the manure in her vegetable bed, prune a few herbs, lay a spectacular table with clever place cards and whip up dinner for 12 with an ever-serene smile.

And that's just what she did in front of the cameras on her syndicated "Martha Stewart Living" and other television appearances. Behind the scenes she was a publisher of books and monthly magazines; overseer of her own furniture, paint, flooring and home-goods lines; a newspaper columnist and even an online florist.

From the publication of her first book, "Entertaining," in 1982, Martha entered popular culture on the heels of the women's liberation movement and made nesting appealing again. Before long, America was on a first-name basis with her.

After her conviction for conspiracy and other charges stemming from stock sales, the share value of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia plummeted, Viacom-owned stations dropped her program, and advertisers fled the pages of her magazines. She has yet to be sentenced to prison, but her empire is in chaos.

There are dozens of home-oriented television personalities and authors (and more waiting to be discovered) who owe the public's appetite for their insights to one woman. The question now is, who will be the next Martha Stewart? Or will there ever be another?

"Martha was the first person to give real take-away practical information to make people's lives better in the areas of cooking and entertaining and crafts," said Charles Segars of Fine Living Network, who

TALK ABOUT IT

Where do you stand on Martha Stewart? Who's your choice as her replacement? And if Martha resumes an active role as domestic guru, how should she reshape herself?

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worked with Stewart at CBS on her prime-time specials in the early '90s. "Anybody who wants to capture Martha's empire is going to have to do that ... but also has to have their own point of view. But the real secret and formula behind Martha ... is how she delivers that information and how it really works."

Not everyone in the field is trying to be "the next Martha," nor even appreciates the comparison.

"I'm just me," said Mary Jane Butters, an Idaho-based organic farmer. "But the news media keeps putting this on all of us. Time magazine had me in there, calling me the Pioneer Martha. It's degrading to all of us."

Sheila Bridges' strength lies in interior design, although her Fine Living Network series, "Designer Living," features chefs and other specialists outside her field. "I certainly wouldn't ever try to market myself in any way as the next Martha Stewart," Bridges said. "I think that would be a tough bill to fill."

Martha's millions of fans have a certain bond with her that is not likely to be shattered by a prison term. It's possible she will be welcomed back in the public eye after serving her time.

"Don't count Martha out — I never will," Segars said. But there is an undeniable opportunity in the short term for another guru of good taste to emerge. The ones profiled here are on the inside track.

SHEILA BRIDGES

Brand: America's best interior designer, according to Time magazine and CNN.

Credentials: Grad of Parsons School of Design; has been showcased in magazines (House & Garden, Town & Country, Vanity Fair, Martha Stewart Living); is a fixture on



Fine Living Network and NBC's "Today"; portfolio includes Bill Clinton's New York offices.

The gimmick:

Advocates investing in a few good pieces of furniture rather than going for flavor of the month.

Book: "Furnishing Forward: A Practical Guide to Furnishing for a Lifetime."

Web site:
www.sheilabridges.com.