

Martha Stewart: corporate cook

The icon of homemaking may lack imagination, but she's turned her talents into a multibillion-dollar empire, writes **Andrea Nagel**

MARTHA Stewart's presentation at the Design Indaba was like a flat note in a sophisticated aria.

Where other designers spoke about cutting-edge ideas examining how technology, science, economics and culture interact with trends, and many addressed innovative ways to protect the environment, Stewart talked about the universe of her company, Omnimedia, her collaboration with huge corporations like K-Mart and her Martha Stewart Living brand, the inspiration behind the colours in her paint range and her all-important collection of Martha Stewart glitter.

She was preceded by Dutch designer Christien Meindertsma, who gave an entertaining talk about the astounding array of products made from different parts of a pig. Meindertsma, whose passion for the unusual in design was evident, plays ironically with products and raw materials in thoughtful ways, aiming to regain an understanding of processes that have become distant through industrialisation.

Although they seem to share a fascination with farm animals, there couldn't have been a greater contrast between Meindertsma and Stewart, who spoke of her love of chickens, glitter and faux bois.

Before the end of her presentation, more than half of the audience had walked out. This was, after all, what Indaba organiser Ravi Naidoo described as "an appreciative and charged community of creative activists".

But those who left Stewart's talk missed the delightful parodying of this home industries magnate by talk-show hosts Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien. She showed the remaining members of the Design Indaba audience clips from their shows in which they flounce around with glitter, clearly mocking the seriousness with which she takes her craft.

Leno glitters a kitten in his show and Conan insists on glittering a ham. Stewart was apparently blissfully unaware of the joke. Even you can do it, she told the audience. Just print a picture downloaded from my website, buy the Martha Stewart glitter and some glue and get glittering-by-numbers.

The audience sniggered, yet, as she emphatically pointed out, "Laugh, glitter is a huge part of my business now, worth millions and millions of dollars."

Undeniably, Stewart has captured the attention of millions of consumers, and she clearly has an enormous following. Her website, marthastewart.com gets millions of hits, and on Twitter, she claims to have almost two million followers. In 2001, Stewart was named the third most powerful woman in America by *Ladies Home Journal* and, notwithstanding her conviction in 2004 for lying to investigators about a stock sale and her consequent five months in prison, her popularity has never been greater — although the response at the Design Indaba was not a good indication of this.

Clearly, Stewart lives by the maxim "no

publicity is bad publicity."

Her seeming lack of irony and her concentration on the conventional are no indication of her intelligence and her vision.

Born Martha Helen Kostyra in 1941 to middle-class Polish-American parents in Jersey City, New York, this doyenne of home industry took the spirit of entrepreneurship and built an empire.

And millions of people rely on her as the arbiter of style and taste.

Having finished school with straight As and after initially intending to study chemistry, Stewart completed a double major in history and architectural history and then became a stockbroker.

Her family had always instilled in her a passion for activities in the home. Her mother had taught her how to cook and sew, she learned the processes of canning and preserving from her grand-



PUG: A creation in glitter by Martha Stewart

parents and her father, who had an obsession with gardening, passed on much of his expertise and knowledge to his daughter.

At school she was an active participant in extracurricular activities, including the school newspaper and the Art Club and she even did a stint of modelling, appearing in many TV commercials and magazines.

With her husband, she undertook a massive restoration of an 1805 farmhouse on Turkey Hill in Westport, Connecticut, that later became the model for the set of her *Martha Stewart Living* programme, and she showed an extraordinary panache for decorating. She started a catering business which led to the publication of her first book, *Entertaining*, which became a *New York Times* Best Seller, and the bestselling cookbook since Julia Child and Simone Beck's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, released 20 years before.

From there, Stewart produced a veritable flood of cookbooks and authored hundreds of newspaper columns and magazine articles on homemaking, appearing on popular television shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* making her the

pre-eminently recognisable face in the home industry in America. Soon after the *Martha Stewart Living* magazine was developed and a programme based on her magazine was formulated.

In the late 1990s, with the assistance of her business partner Sharon Patrick, Stewart secured funds to purchase the television, print, and merchandising ventures related to the Martha Stewart brand and consolidated them into a new company that would be controlled by her, The Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia.

With such a diverse and successful background, Stewart could hardly fail. The focus on the home during her childhood had given her invaluable domestic skills, her modelling career had prepared her for her role in front of the camera and her foray into stockbroking had given her experience of the business world. She also made it evident in her presentation that throughout her career, she has had superlative collaborators.

To millions of women around the world, Stewart is a sterling example of how women can become immensely powerful using the talents of homemaking, which were previously not respected in the world of business.

Her immense commercial success also begs the question: Is she, like the millionaires of bubble-gum pop, Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson and the like, just exceptionally well managed, or is there a brilliance to their seeming vacuousness, lack of irony and cynicism that repeatedly captures the imagination of the American public? The answer is that it is both. Putting Stewart in a conference among speakers like the Bouroullec Brothers, Tord Boontje and Troika is like putting Jessica Simpson in a concert with M.I.A., Beck and Alanis Morissette. Not really a good idea if you want the audience to stick around. Yet organiser Naidoo arguably seems to know what he is doing because Stewart has been the talk, albeit in a rather negative context, of the Indaba since she spoke. One has to also remember she is almost 70 years old and making more money every year.

At a highly controlled press conference after her talk, for which questions had to be submitted and approved beforehand, she said: "When I see products that young people are designing they're not terribly useful. There's clearly a lot of creativity, but very rarely do I see something and think: this is something that I can't live without. My business philosophy is based on need and want."

When asked about her contribution to the sustainability of the environment, she quipped, "I have an extremely successful collaboration with The Home Depot, which is the largest seller in the world of do-it-yourself..."

Martha Stewart has made a fortune from the many skills and talents that have, for so long, been taken for granted. The success of her empire shows that there is clearly still a place for the rampant commercialism of corporate icons made powerful through media and merchandising, though that place definitely isn't South Africa's 2010 Design Indaba.



HAMMING IT UP: Talk-show host Conan O'Brien takes the mickey out of Martha Stewart's craft-making and cooking skills, in a video clip she showed at the Design Indaba in Cape Town
Picture: AP