

Martha Stewart's visit a good thing for Antonio's

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The queen of gracious living surprised restaurant co-owner Ida Martinho by walking into the popular Portuguese restaurant unannounced for a meal at 11:15 a.m.

NEW BEDFORD — It was cupcakes to cod cakes for Martha Stewart this week.

After spending Tuesday in a big-box store in New Jersey at a book-signing for her newest title, "Martha Stewart's Cupcakes: 175 Inspired Ideas for Everyone's Favorite Treat," the queen of gracious living came to SouthCoast, showing up Wednesday for a cozy lunch at Antonio's on Coggeshall Street.

Stewart and her entourage — six people in two vehicles — surprised restaurant co-owner Ida Martinho by walking into the popular Portuguese restaurant unannounced for a meal at 11:15 a.m.

"They said they were going from New York to Maine and they had heard good things about the restaurant so they wanted to try us," Martinho said. The visit was seemingly quite a compliment considering the distance the party had strayed from a more direct route along Interstate 95.

Stewart, who has a summer home in Mount Desert Island, wanted to try some seafood and asked for a recommendation.

"We had some nice fresh tuna so she ordered that. She had it grilled and it was served with broccoli and round fries," Martinho said.

Antonio's popular round fries are hand-cut like potato chips.

Stewart also ordered another of the house specialties, bulhao pato, as an appetizer.

"That was her favorite dish," Martinho said of the little necks steamed with olive oil, garlic and parsley. "And we also gave her some cod cakes on the house. She enjoyed them, too."

According to head chef and co-owner Antonio Afonso, who emerged from the kitchen to meet the party, Stewart liked the food.

"She said it was excellent," he said. "I just bought the tuna locally. The party ordered two: one rare and one medium rare."

None of the staff recognized any of the other members of her party.

"Two of them were her drivers," Martinho said. "They had two black vehicles," both SUVs.

The visit also generated plenty of excitement for the lunchtime crew. "I'm still on Cloud 9," said waitress Maria Liberato, who served the party. "She was very nice. She enjoyed her meal and she left a good tip."

This was not Liberato's first exposure to a real live celebrity. "Stanford from 'Sex and the City' was in here," she said, referring to actor Willie Garson who played the character.

Ida Martinho and her husband, Tony Martinho, operate the popular restaurant jointly with her sister Linda and her husband, Afonso.

Antonio's will celebrate its 20th anniversary this September, and its reputation has also attracted some other famous people to the city.

"We had Hank Aaron in here. He loved the seafood Antonio," Martinho said. Former Red Sox player "Mo Vaughn used to come here, too."

Is it possible other high-powered celebrities will now seek out New Bedford for its cod cakes on Martha's recommendation?

"When she ordered a cappuccino to go, she took our menu with her," Martinho said, "so who knows?"