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CELEBRITIES & TV 9:46 a.m. Tuesday, September 8, 2009

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Are 'Housewives' best ambassadors for Atlanta?

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By Chandra R. Thomas
For the AJC

It's probably safe to assume that when Fabrice Vergez opened French American Brasserie in downtown Atlanta in 2007, he didn't expect its biggest claim to fame to be that some reality show cast members had a catfight out front.

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Wilford Harewood, © Bravo

NeNe Leakes and Kim Zolciak have words during an episode of "Real Housewives of Atlanta." Some say the cast members show Atlanta in a bad light, while others argue that any publicity is good publicity for Atlanta businesses.

"It got pretty loud so we asked some customers in the dining room if they wanted to move to a quieter spot in the restaurant," recalls Vergez, of the incident that began inside FAB, but later moved outside. "But they said 'No, no.' It was like dinner and a show!"

Ever since the fracas involving three cast members of the Bravo network's "The Real Housewives of Atlanta" — a reality show whose premiere episode snagged more than 4 million viewers last month — aired nationwide, the upscale French eatery has been receiving lots of attention. In fact, the couple who had complained to Vergez about the outburst inside the restaurant ended up asking for autographs and posing for photos with the cast members on their way out.

"We have people driving up and taking pictures of the entrance, people requesting to sit at the same table where they sat, and I've even had a movie scout stop by to look at my place," adds Vergez, who insists that any attention is good attention. "If they were shown shopping at Neiman Marcus Atlanta or Cartier, that wouldn't reflect negatively on those places. The national attention that the show has brought to FAB is something I could never pay for."

The question is whether what is great for business at FAB, Twist, Rosa Mexicano, Dance 411, Lenox Square, The Purple Door hair salon and many other places featured prominently on the popular show, is good for Atlanta overall?

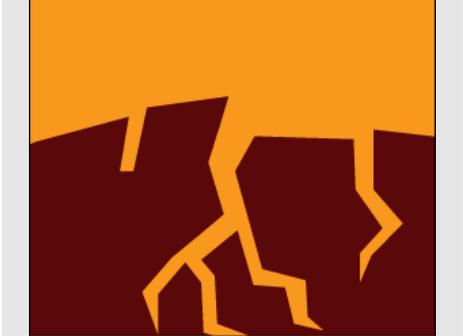
Are the cast members — in all their over-the-top dramatic glory — effective, albeit unofficial, ambassadors for our city? And exactly what is the show projecting about the ATL? The answers depend on who you ask.

"The fact that Bravo chose to do a show here speaks volumes about Atlanta already, they're not featuring boring cities," says Q100 radio show host Bert Weiss, who has interviewed most of the cast members on his morning show. "On one hand it's giving a new look to the South. Because for a lot of people, the stereotype is still 'The Dukes of Hazzard.' But on the other hand, you also have women in their 30s and 40s with children getting into fistfights and yelling matches on the street. That's not my Atlanta." Adds Weiss: "I think most people who watch the show realize that this is about these five women, not Atlanta. At least I hope so. I don't know anyone here who lives like they do."

Shana Davis, a stay-at-home mom and entrepreneur in southwest Atlanta, agrees that the show

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portrays the ATL as a happening and hip destination for those who desire to become upwardly mobile.

"The show is definitely portraying that you can be successful in Atlanta even if you weren't born with a silver spoon in your mouth because it is evident that these women were not," Davis said. "Quite honestly I think this show is a great example of how money and class are two different things!"

However, Davis, who was a member of a local chapter of Mocha Moms, a national, nonprofit support group for mothers of color, is less concerned about Atlanta's image than she is about how she believes that black women are portrayed on the show.

"They're showing African-American women as angry and hard to get along with," Davis said. "Unfortunately, the damaging aspects of their behavior is so distracting that it overshadows the positives, like the fact that they are moms, wives and entrepreneurs."

Georgia State University marketing professor Corliss Thornton says "Atlanta Housewives" has great potential to create a national "buzz" about the city and gives the rest of the country a rare glimpse into the lives of well-to-do African-Americans.

"Before this show, a lot of people across the country probably had no idea that there were so many successful African-Americans here," she said.

Jelani Cobb, a professor and history department chairman at Atlanta's top-ranked historically black all-female Spelman College, doesn't see anything positive about the show. He likens it to the success of other "stereotypical" reality shows like VH1's "Flavor of Love."

"It plays into the stereotypes of black women: the cattiness, the neck rolling," says Cobb, who asserts that the recent foreclosures and evictions faced by some members of the cast are the only accurate depictions of Atlanta life.

"I haven't seen the other 'Real Housewives' shows set in New York City or California, but I am sure what the characters on those shows portray doesn't register on the same level as this show featuring mostly black women."

But former Fox 5 television personality Brett Martin argues that the characters on all of "The Real Housewives" franchises are stereotypical.

"On the Orange County one, they're all wrapped up into what their bodies look like and in New Jersey there's the whole Mafia family thing," says Martin, now a freelance journalist. "There's an affluent African-American community in Atlanta and the producers are just trying to exploit that, too."

WSB-AM's Condace Pressley, who proudly displays a snapshot of herself with "Atlanta Housewives" cast member NeNe Leakes as her Facebook profile photo, insists that Atlantans should not view the show as anything more than entertainment.

"It's entertaining, laugh-out-loud funny, a real hoot," Pressley said. "This is 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous' on steroids. It's a larger than life representation of life in Atlanta and anyone who is watching it expecting anything more is expecting too much."

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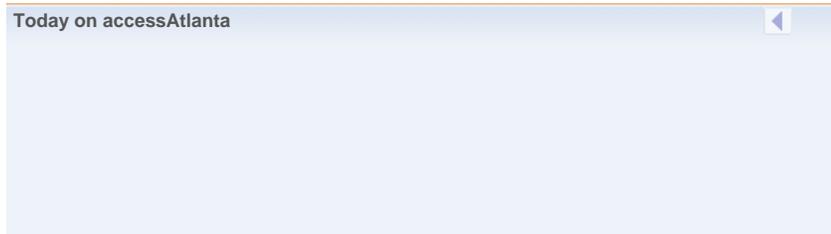
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