

Starkville native Marisa Baggett competes on national sushi making show

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USA TODAY NETWORK

When Starkville native Marisa Baggett stepped into the culinary world more than 20 years ago, being a sushi chef was not part of the plan, let alone competing with the nation's best on TV. Baggett, who now resides in Nashville, began as a baker in the early 2000's, decorating cakes at her restaurant The Chocolate Giraffe in the Cotton District of Starkville.

When a friend asked Baggett to cater sushi for a party, the emerging chef thought she might as well give it a try, and went to the local library to check out books on Japanese cuisine.

In the two decades that followed, Baggett, the first Black woman in the United States to graduate from a professional sushi training program, turned an unexpected passion into a trail-blazing career putting a Southern spin on a traditional Japanese dish.

Baggett will appear on Season 2 of "Morimoto's Sushi Master," a competition show bringing together some of the nation's best sushi chefs. The show streams on the Roku Channel starting Friday, April 25.

From Southern baking to Japanese cooking

After shifting gears from cakes to sushi, Baggett, in her 20's at the time, began studying Japanese techniques in depth.

Baggett, now 48, is currently focused on plant-based sushi, a niche, she said, that bloomed from avoiding raw fish the first time she made sushi.

"(I thought) once this is over with, then I'm just going to go back to decorating cakes," Baggett said. "It went over way better than I was expecting it to, and people kept asking, and I kept doing it, and I just kind of fell in love with sushi."

Baggett's sushi career quickly began to grow outside of Starkville, and she hit the big time she received a call from Tu-

pelo asking to rent out her restaurant to host 12 businessmen flying in from Japan.

That night was a nerve-wracking experience, Baggett said, and she still wasn't completely attached to the idea of becoming a full-time sushi chef.

"I promised myself I will never do this again. ... I will stop pretending to be a sushi chef, and I'll just go back to decorating cakes," Baggett said. "What I know now is that they were absolutely not expecting an authentic (Japanese) experience. They actually ate a lot of sushi. They kept ordering."

After that night, Baggett decided that she would commit to her new path. She closed her Starkville restaurant and went to California to study the art of sushi making, graduating from the California Sushi Academy in 2003, making history as the first Black woman in the U.S. to graduate from professional sushi training.

Baggett published a cookbook called "Sushi Secrets: Easy Recipes for the Home Cook" in 2012 and followed up in 2016 with "Vegetarian Sushi Secrets: 101 Healthy and Delicious Recipes."

In recent years, Baggett has focused on plant-based sushi, a pursuit, she said, that honors the underlying spirit of Japanese cuisine: relying on ingredients that are fresh and seasonal.

Baggett also specializes in kosher sushi. While in Memphis, Baggett, who is Jewish herself, opened a service providing kosher sushi for private events. She eventually expanded into kosher cooking and opened Zayde's NYC Deli inside the Memphis Jewish Community Center.

Throughout her career of blending culinary traditions, Baggett has described herself as both a "chef" and a "storyteller," using stories to bring dishes to life in all different cultures.

"For me, telling stories is a way to get people to connect," Baggett said. "Whether I'm standing in front of you at a sushi bar, in your home teaching you how to make sushi, or I'm just offering something online to introduce you to a new food, I want you to feel like you un-



Renowned sushi chef Masaharu Morimoto (left) and Starkville native Marisa Baggett (right) on Season Two of "Morimoto's Sushi Master."

MICHAEL SERINE/ COURTESY OF MARISA BAGGETT

derstand where the food is coming from."

After spending most of her career in Memphis working at a sushi bar and catering private events, Baggett relocated to Nashville last June. She's currently teaching online classes and workshops. Baggett is also focused on writing as she reflects on her career so far.

Baggett produces a weekly newsletter called "Dear Sensei," where she shares recipes and stories connecting food and identity.

"Morimoto's Sushi Master" is just the latest step in Baggett's accomplished, and often unexpected, career.

Baggett couldn't say much about filming the show until the episodes air but said working with renowned chef Masaharu Morimoto was exciting.

"Just the idea of being in the same room as the Iron Chef himself was just absolutely incredible," Baggett said. "He's someone that I've always admired, someone that I've always wanted to meet."

Morimoto was one of the original Iron Chefs on the Japanese cooking show

"Iron Chef" in the '90s, which has produced several spin-offs, including "Iron Chef America."

Baggett, one of eight contestants, said she and the other chefs had a lot of fun despite the competitive atmosphere.

"They demanded a lot from us," Baggett said. "I don't think it's usual that this happens for a lot of cooking competition shows, but we actually bonded as friends, and we actually still all keep in touch."

No matter the outcome of the upcoming "Morimoto's Sushi Master" season, it's safe to say Baggett has made her mark on the sushi scene, all while honoring her Southern roots.

Since she started her sushi career, Baggett has aimed to make Japanese cuisine seem more accessible to the average American home.

"Look, I started doing all of this in Starkville, Mississippi, and I guarantee you, you can do it too wherever you are," Baggett said.

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NOTICE OF PROPOSED CONSTRUCTION OF INTERSTATE NATURAL GAS PIPELINE FACILITIES

On April 16th, 2025, Gulf South Pipeline Company, LLC (Gulf South), filed an application for its Southeast Compression Utility and Reliability Expansion Project ("SECURE Project" or "Project") with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) under Section 7(c) of the Natural Gas Act in Docket No. CP25-219.

As part of the SECURE Project, Gulf South is requesting approval to make improvements at four locations to help maintain reliable natural gas service in the Southeastern United States. The proposed work includes adding new compressor units and equipment at Gulf South's existing Tallulah Compressor Station in Madison Parish, LA, and Jasper Compressor Station in Jasper County, MS; upgrading Gulf South's Forrest Compressor Station in Forrest County, MS by adding a new compressor unit, modifying an existing unit, and installing ancillary equipment; and building a new compressor station in Hinds County, MS, which will include one compressor unit and ancillary equipment.

The Project is more fully described in Gulf South's application to the FERC. A copy of the application is available at the Lois A. Flagg Library (105 Williamson Ave Edwards, MS 39066) and can be accessed on the FERC's eLibrary at <https://elibrary.ferc.gov/elibrary/search>. Search in the eLibrary by entering the docket number in the Reference Number field to access the Project documents. Gulf South has also mailed Project notices to landowners who are considered directly affected by the Project, per the FERC's regulations, and to relevant governing entities.

Gulf South's Project website ([SECURE.gulfsouthpl.com](https://www.secure.gulfsouthpl.com)) addresses general information about the Project, including Frequently Asked Questions, the regulatory process, environmental protection, safety, how to contact Gulf South, and how to access the FERC's website to review and obtain copies of public filings.

For information on becoming involved in the FERC review of this Project or to obtain the FERC pamphlet, "An Interstate Natural Gas Facility on My Land? What Do I Need to Know?," go to the FERC's website at www.ferc.gov or call the FERC Office of External Affairs at (202) 502-8004, or toll free at (866) 208-3372.

For additional information about the Project, you may contact Gulf South via its Project hotline or Project email address.

Hotline: (877-972-8533)

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